



LECTURES.

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LECTURES
ON THE
PARABLE
OF
THE PRODIGAL SON,

DELIVERED IN THE
PARISH CHURCH OF ST. MARY,
NEWINGTON BUTTS,
DURING THE SEASON OF LENT, 1833,

BY THE
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P R E F A C E.

THE following Lectures are allowed to go to the press, in deference to the wishes of a large portion of my kind and affectionate hearers, to whom they are dedicated, as a feeble tribute of ministerial gratitude, and pastoral regard. With the anxious expectation, that what was heard from the pulpit with such an intensity of proper feeling, and commanded such extraordinary attendance and attention, will not be altogether devoid of interest when perused in private; I

am induced to submit the Lectures to the public, precisely in the same dress, in which they appeared at church. I have no time, or taste for rhetorical embellishment, being of opinion with an old divine, "that a sermon, like a tool, may be polished until it has lost its edge." If the Spirit of God will vouchsafe to accompany this volume into the parlour, with the same manifestations of *His* presence as were displayed in the sanctuary, I shall sit down quietly under the lash of the most severe criticism. In *His* hands I leave this little work. It has nothing of novelty, only of simplicity and adaptation to the occurrences of daily life, to recommend it to general attention. Whatever be its imperfections, blemishes, or errors, they are attributable solely to myself: wherever the sentiments and

spirit of Christianity are displayed ; and the mercy of God evinced by the Redeemer in the salvation of fallen humanity, elucidated ; not unto myself, but unto *Him*, who is the “ Author and Giver of all good,” be ascribed the praise, honor, and glory, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

H. S. PLUMPTRE.

April 27th, 1833.

C O N T E N T S.

LECTURE I.

INTRODUCTION. The Prodigal's impatience and independence *Page 1*

LECTURE II.

The Prodigal's first step in his wicked career and subsequent extravagance 30

LECTURE III.

The Prodigal's destitution, degradation, misery, and ruin, 58

LECTURE IV.

The Prodigal's madness: his recovery, and deliberation 87

LECTURE V.

The Prodigal's return as a penitent to his father. The confession of his guilt 115

LECTURE VI.

The Prodigal's reception at home, and the gracious conduct of the father	144
--	-----

LECTURE VII.

The Prodigal's restoration, not only to his former privileges, but also the additional honours conferred upon him	174
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LECTURES.

LECTURE I.

Luke xv. 11, 12.

A certain man had two sons, and the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living.

WHEN I contrast the different circumstances under which we are convened on the present occasion, with those with which the season of Lent was ushered in twelve months ago, “I am lost in wonder, love, and praise.” Last year* at this pe-

* The cholera had been committing its ravages for nearly two months in the parish. These preliminary observations are printed to record the mercy of God in the removal of the pestilence.

riod, all was consternation and alarm. Fearfulness and trembling, in varied hues, were depicted on every countenance, which, in defiance of every effort at concealment, bespoke the trepidation of each throbbing bosom. The withering blast of the pestilence had so polluted our atmosphere, that to some, the very air which was given to sustain life, was converted into the instrument of its destruction. Imagination was already busy in conjecture who were to be the intended victims of the sweeping scourge. The funeral knell was constantly announcing in our ears, that some friend, relative, or neighbour, were snatched from the living to be numbered with the dead. The destroying angel had received it in command to enter the dwellings of many within the circumference of this parish, to an extent as great, if not greater, than in any other parish throughout the metropolis. But now the desolating plague has been withdrawn from us. The Lord has "been

entreated for the land," and has recalled to himself the messenger of vengeance, saying, "It is enough; stay now thine hand." By what singular mercy then have we escaped the fearful contagion, and have been spared from the general wreck to assemble together this night under the roof of this house? We can only acknowledge the boon by saying, that "it is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed." What gratitude then ought to be ours! Let those among us who sit in sable garments, as an outward token of the bereavement they have endured—the force of which may be felt, but cannot be described—learn "in patience to possess their souls," and bow with submission to *Him* who "doeth all things well." Yea, even with the funereal garb wrapt around your shoulders, we would bid "you rejoice in the Lord, and joy in the God of your salvation." But more especially do we call upon *you*, who, with yourselves and families, are all alive this

day, to tune your harps to songs of praise. While, however, we would thus elicit the thanksgiving hymn, we would at the same time bid you “rejoice with *trembling*.” The disease came among us, we know not how ; it existed among us, we know not how ; it departed from us, we know not how, nor whither it went. It *may*, then, *return*, we know not how. It *must* return, if we return to our former iniquities. While, then, we acknowledge the mercy which hath preserved us alive unto this day, let us devote those lives so wonderfully preserved to the service of our Benefactor ; then, whether the “pestilence walks in darkness, or the sickness destroys at noon day,” we shall not be unprepared for the attack ; and if we fall, we shall die nobly fighting the battles of the Lord of Hosts, and shall receive the reward of the victorious conqueror, even the “crown of glory that fadeth not away,” bestowed by the great Captain of our salvation, Jesus Christ the righteous.

Having made these few prefatory remarks, which the occasion so imperatively demands, I proceed to solicit your attention to the words of our text, which we have designed as the basis of our evening's meditation.

It may possibly occasion some surprise that the subject which I have selected for our Lectures, should have been one so trite and familiar. I did not arrive at this determination hastily or unadvisedly; not without much deliberation and prayerful meditation. I might have embraced this opportunity to have endeavoured to solve some theological difficulty; to have expressed an opinion on some point of theological controversy; or to have exposed and refuted some theological heresy.

I might have attempted to have amused your understandings by some theological speculation, soaring into the regions of unfulfilled prophecy; foolishly seeking, as some do, to fathom the depths of the divine mind, of which we can scarcely scan

even the surface. I might have gone to the depository of sacred treasures, and have sought from thence, something that at least wore the *aspect* of novelty; for Solomon has declared, that there is *really* nothing “*new* under the sun.” But I candidly acknowledge, that I prefer extracting materials for our meditation, from stores which are not only venerable for their antiquity, and for their plainness and simplicity, but whose capability also of enrichment hath been confessed by successive generations. I desire rather to be profitably practical, than to be speculatively pleasing; to be useful, rather than to be entertaining; to instruct, rather than to amuse the understanding; to influence the heart, rather than the head, if both objects are not to be attained. We seek not to pander to the vitiated appetites of our hearers; or to attempt to satiate the feverish thirst of those who are running to and fro in every direction, to obtain a draught from some untried

fountain. We wish not to captivate, by dressing up religion in a novel garb; what is new in theology may well excite our suspicion and distrust. Our object is, rather to place before your eyes doctrines and duties already familiar, but whose familiarity hath produced oblivion and disregard: to remind you of what you already know, rather than attempt to inform you of what you do not know; though, of course, we speak here under certain limitations; for one great design of our ministerial exertions, is the instruction in righteousness and edification in holiness. For these reasons, therefore, I have deemed the subject we propose to discuss, an appropriate topic for meditation, supplying abundant materials for profitable contemplation to almost every class of our hearers.

But I have an additional motive for the line of conduct I have pursued. An earnest desire to promote, to the utmost of my power, the best interests of the young

and inexperienced members of our flock. Scarcely, perhaps, ever was there a period when their welfare was more endangered than at the present crisis. Scepticism, and modern liberality, falsely so called, which is only infidelity in disguise, have gone far to annihilate, or at least to neutralize, sound scriptural principles ; and the licentiousness of modern custom, fashion, manners, and society, threatens with a daring hand to subvert sound scriptural practice. We contend, that the young of the present day are exposed to peculiar temptations ; which will account, in some measure, for the peculiar obliquity of their conduct, so universally acknowledged, and fervently deplored. It is one part of our pastoral duty, (a duty too much overlooked by ministers, within and without our establishment,) to take under our fostering protection the youthful subjects of our charge. We are apt too much to disregard them ; until left to themselves, they escape from our control, and overleaping

the barriers which reason and religion have prescribed as the walls of their enclosure, they wander on without a guide, until they are ultimately lost amid the wiles and intricacies of a wilderness world. With a view, then, of counteracting in some measure the baneful influence of the pestilential atmosphere, which is blasting the opening prospects of the rising generation ; we have earnestly solicited the attendance of the young of this parish, within these hallowed walls, during the delivery of our course of Lectures, which will be framed with reference to their special requirements. Here we shall endeavour to present them with an antidote to that poison, which unwittingly, perhaps, they are imbibing ; and with which they are already, to a certain extent, contaminated. Here we shall exhibit to them a mirror of deformity, in which they may see their own likeness, and recoil at the resemblance ; but here also we shall endeavour so to invest them with the

panoply of God, as that the “enemy shall not be able to do them violence, nor the son of wickedness to hurt them.” Here also we shall endeavour to show them how this deformity may be transformed into the divine image and likeness. Come then with us, my dear young friends, and we promise to do you good. Accept our invitation. Snatch a few moments from the avocations of your daily calling, or from the fascinations of your daily delights. Retire with us for a little while from the noise and bustle of an unthinking world, into the recesses of this sanctuary; and I trust that you will have occasion to bear testimony that this is “none other but the house of God, and that this is the gate of heaven.” Keeping these objects steadily in view, and imploring, as we earnestly do, the blessing of God on our exertions, without which the most harmonious accents are powerless and unmeaning as “sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal;” we venture to

analyse the parable under consideration.

We would just allude to the circumstances which elicited from the lips of our blessed Master, this beautiful illustration of the doctrine he intended to convey. Indeed, the three parables comprised in this chapter breathe the same sentiment, and respond to the same string of divine mercy. The Scribes and Pharisees, the implacable and unwearied enemies of our Lord, brought it as a railing accusation against him, that he conversed and sat down to meat with those who were notorious sinners. Our Lord unhesitatingly admits the fact, and pleads guilty to the charge; but vindicates himself from the criminality which they would attach to his proceedings, by declaring the *purpose* for which he associated with some of the vilest of characters—the refuse of society; that he came to *convict* them *of* their sin, and *convert* them *from* it; that he came purposely to call these nefarious sinners to

repentance, and not those who, like the Pharisees, fancied that they were righteous and needed no repentance. He then exemplifies his declaration by the following parable, which begins thus :—" A certain man had two sons." The psalmist says, that " children, and the fruit of the womb, are an heritage and gift that cometh of the Lord." Let parents acknowledge the boon with gratitude, and consecrate their offspring to the service of the donor ; nor let them murmur if the same hand which is stretched out in bestowing, at some early period should be extended again to receive ; but let them adopt on this, as on every other occasion, the language of Job under a similar bereavement, when he said, " The Lord gives, and the Lord takes away ; blessed be the name of the Lord." Of children thus given, some are the delight, some are the bane of their parents ; some are the glory of their father, and his crown of rejoicing ; while others " bring down his grey hairs with sorrow

to the grave." Of some it must be said, that "it would have been good for them if they had never been born." It would be foreign to our purpose to attempt the inquiry into the reason for this diversity of character; why, for instance, Cain was a murderer, and Abel a righteous man. In fact, no satisfactory answer can be given. The only solution of the problem is this, "Even so, Father, for it seemed good in thy sight." We must not endeavour to pry into the mind of Omniscience. Faith believeth all things recounted in scripture, but attempts not to assign a reason for their existence.

Under this title of "a certain man," we can have no doubt but that allusion is here made to God as the common Father, for "in him we all live, and move, and have our being." By the two sons, we have a reference made to the two descriptions of character who were present to the speaker's eye: the Pharisees and the Publicans. The latter it was the object

of Christ to bring to repentance ; the former he endeavoured to reconcile to the free spontaneous offers of mercy, which were so largely and liberally proffered to sinners in general, and against which the indignation of these self-righteous persons was aroused. The publican is here delineated under the character of the younger son.

I. We will first of all investigate the nature of the son's petition, and the circumstances which induced the father to grant it. " Father," said he, " give me the portion of goods that falleth to me." It is fair to imagine that both children had alike partaken of the same privileges ; both, no doubt, had received every kindness and attention which a fond pious father could bestow upon his beloved offspring. Nothing that was for their advantage did he withhold from his darling children. Domesticated under the parental roof, they had fully participated in

every parental blessing. But the kindness of the parent will not always ensure the obedience and dutiful affection of the child. Something more than the apparatus of human skill is required to direct and regulate the human heart. The grace of God can alone control the powers of this complicated, mighty engine, either of good or evil, which elevates us either to heaven, or hurls us down into hell. Hitherto probably there had been no perceptible difference in the character of these two sons: possibly no opportunity had been afforded for a development of their different dispositions; under a similarity of circumstances they had both grown together beneath their father's roof with a similarity of deportment. But the mask of the younger now falls off, and his deformed features become apparent to all. He began to grow weary of acting a part which he was ill qualified to sustain. He wished to figure away in the great theatre of life, and not

to be confined to the circumscribed limits of a domestic area. He wished to be an independent being—yes! not only independent of his father, but of his God; he wished to think and act for himself; or, in common language, he wished to stamp himself *a man*. But before this could be effected he must be possessed of the means of indulging his folly, and securing, as he imagined, his title to independence. He knew that so long as his property was in his father's custody, his desires would be restrained; his ambition to shine in society as a man of the world would be repressed. He therefore besought his father that his money might be at his own disposal. "Father," said he, "give me the portion of goods that falleth to me." The real character of this prodigal spendthrift, which had hitherto, with difficulty, been suppressed, now began to be fully developed. The petition itself was improper, and urged in unbecoming language. He assumed too much the

tone of authority and dictation to his parent; he seemed to demand somewhat imperatively, that as a *right*, which in reality if conferred, was a mere spontaneous act of kindness, dependent on his parent's good will. It is evident to my apprehension, by the expression hereafter used, that he really had nothing which he could call his *own*, or which fell to him by inheritance; for the father is described as dividing between his sons *his* living; all he had to subsist on; not *their* property but *his own*; the sum total of his earthly possession. So that the son arrogantly demanded *that* to which he had no legal or equitable claim, and that too with a determination of purpose which appeared to take no denial. “*Give me,*” said he, “my portion;” he might have added, if it seems good to thee, O my father. But he now began to throw aside all those restraints which should have been imposed by decency, filial affection, and parental reverence. He yielded to the im-

pulse of some of the vilest of passions, of which his father was to be the first victim ; the profligate career of this prodigal youth was to be ushered in by an act of audacity towards his parent.

But for what purpose was it that this stripling so earnestly desired to have the absolute control over that property, which he designated as his own, and which, therefore, he felt he had a right to demand? Was it that he might embark in some honorable, learned, or lucrative profession, and thus rise to distinction by the ordinary steps of diligence, perseverance, and integrity? Or did he wish to purchase an estate which might perpetuate the name of his family through countless generations? Had this been his object, we might have been disposed to view in a more favourable light his importunity. But he had no such intention ; nothing was more remote from his contemplation. He was about to embark solely as he imagined on an enterprise of pleasure. He was

too unsettled in mind to enter upon any professional engagement, however numerous or valuable its advantages. He was determined to seek for that which hitherto, as he conceived, had eluded his grasp, *happiness*. He resolved on the indulgence and gratification of every desire, which hitherto had been stifled in his bosom, but now thirsting for satiety burst forth with irresistible violence. He could no longer tolerate the idea of dragging out a monotonous existence, under the anxious superintendence of a parent's eye, where every look was observed, and every action criticized: he was resolved on positive enjoyment; he was arrived at that period when he would see life, and taste life, and drain its cup to the very dregs. He panted for liberty, and once in possession of the golden key, which could unlock the door of his prison-house, he determined on being free. In common language, he had attained the years of discretion; but this term could not have been

more unhappily misapplied. Does this wretched boy stand alone in the world, or has the Saviour, in the parable, been sketching an imaginary character whose reality never existed? Who traces not his own likeness in the portrait held up to your view? I appeal to the hearts and consciences of you my hearers. What *man* among you, who has attained the age of maturity, if he speak the sentiment of truth, must not confess with shame and confusion of face, that he has personated the same character? Who among us, just as we were about to be launched from school into the world, with the blood circulating with rapidity through our veins, and our pulse beating high with ardent anticipations of ascending the pinnacle of grandeur and of glory, have not gone to our father with this request, "Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me?" or if we have not done so, we were restrained only from the fear of incurring his wrathful indignation, and

meeting with a stern refusal. O how earnestly did we desire to become possessed of our paternal property, or to procure riches as the means of self-gratification, by almost any means, that our names might stand high on the lists of fashion and of fame! But how few have ever attained the object of their ambition; or, having attained it, were not disappointed in the possession; disgusted at their own folly in pursuing a phantom, and were obliged to confess that “all is vanity and vexation of spirit;” that with all their earthly distinctions they were losing the “crown of eternal glory?” Whose heart does not *now* reproach him for his temerity and presumption in attempting to make himself the arbiter of his own destiny? and where should we now have been, had not the merciful hand of God interposed to arrest our progress in the career of vice? But if we fail to acknowledge our moral likeness in the mirror held up to our view, our spi-

ritual resemblance must secure our attention. We outwardly and publicly confess that God is our Father, the author and giver of every good gift; that we have nothing which we can call our own; all is *His*. We profess to seek every blessing from God; but do not our prayers too often assume the language of authority and dictation? We seem rather to prescribe to God what he should bestow upon us, than leave him to assign us that portion which seemeth Him good. We appear to demand that rather as a *right*, which is only a *privilege*; to claim his bounty rather as the reward of our *merit*, than the result of his *mercy*; and grudge if we be not satisfied, that what is allotted to us is commensurate with our deserts. We virtually come before God and say, "Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me." And having obtained them, how are they employed? Not in the service of the proprietor, whose they are and to whose sole honour they ought to

be consecrated ; but we use them in pandering to our own lusts and appetites ; we convert them as instruments for promoting our own and not the glory of our Master ; we desecrate them to the vilest of purposes, and justify our conduct by that most perverted of all arguments, “ Have I not a right to do what I will with my own ? ” when in fact we have nothing which we can call *our own* ; or, else still more impiously we dedicate them to the service of satan, and convert our bodies, the “ temples of the Holy Ghost,” into the abode of all that is shameless and nameless, in vicious principle and devilish practice. Then again, we copy the example of this unhappy spendthrift in another point of view : we try to take the management of our affairs into our own hands ; impiously conceiving that we can order them better than Omniscience itself. How often do we arraign the conduct of God at the bar of our own tribunal ; murmur at his ap-

pointment, and secretly impugn his government? When our hopes are blasted, and our plans annihilated, we attribute the failure to the work being wrested from our own control. Thus we perish the victims of our own folly and impiety.

II. But we pass on to notice very briefly, *secondly and lastly*, the *conduct of the father*. He granted his son's petition; for we read that "he divided unto them *his* living;" not, you will observe, *their* hereditary property, for it appears they had *none*; but *his* own living; he robbed himself to enrich his sons. It is possible that the father, in the first instance, resisted his son's exorbitant request, and reasoned with him on the folly and impropriety of his conduct; but finding that all argument was ineffectual, and that he was determined on pursuing his own head-long career, he at last yielded to his importunities in order that he might be allowed to feel the full effects

of his headstrong waywardness, by attempting to prove himself wiser than his father. Sometimes there is as much mercy in denying, as in granting a petition; sometimes infinitely *more*. This our heavenly Father knows; and therefore in very love to his supplicating people, denies them those requests made in ignorance and in blindness; which, if granted, would either impair their happiness or insure their destruction. But sometimes, even God himself is provoked to yield to our unceasing applications, and as an act of judicial punishment, indulges us with the gratification of our heart's desire. "Be it unto thee even as thou wilt," is not only the answer to our *patience*, but sometimes to our *impatience*. This God does, not to destroy us, but to humble us; to teach us a lesson of dependence; to lash us into obedience; to make us acknowledge our temerity in preferring our *own*, to *his* guidance; to show us that in Himself

alone is stability and security. It has been remarked, that "whatsoever the Lord moves us unto prospers, but those things which we move him to grant, seldom succeed." No manner of thing that is really good will the Lord withhold from his loving children; but then we must leave *him* to determine what is good. He sees not as man sees. "God denies a Christian nothing, but to give him something better." Would we always be successful petitioners, let us "seek those things which are above." Let spiritual heavenly treasures be the object of our attainment, then "whatsoever we thus ask in prayer, believing, we shall receive." But under all circumstances, let the true spirit of resignation which shone so conspicuously in the Redeemer's character, be displayed in ours, "Nevertheless not my will, but thine, O God, be done."

Here, then, for the present, we bid adieu to the indulgent father and re-

bellious son. But ere we part let them speak a word to those who are parents, and those who are children.

To *Parents*. Endeavour by all possible means to restrain the inordinate desires of impetuous youth. Yield not to their pressing solicitations, when compliance with their demands would place in jeopardy, either their present or eternal happiness. Furnish them not with suicidal weapons, lest their blood be required at your hands. Learn with affection, but with firmness, to say, No. Remember the case of Eli; he was a fond, weak, foolish father, criminally indulgent to his sons; and as is generally the case in such instances, his love was not returned by a corresponding affection on their parts. They treated him with contempt rather than with reverence. He should have exercised his parental authority to have enforced obedience; whereas, by conniving at the excesses of his sons, he unwittingly entailed

a curse upon himself and family. Teach your children the knowledge, and the love, and the fear of God, as their heavenly Father in Christ Jesus. Obedience to their earthly parents will soon follow. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom ;" let children learn it from the cradle.

To *Children*. Know in what your happiness consists ; not in resisting but in complying with paternal exhortations and commands. Be not anxious to take the reins of government into your own hands. You know not the difficulty of self-control. You cannot yet curb one passion, how then can you contend with a legion ? Be willing to submit to the guidance of parental affection ; nor think it a degradation to your character. We have the highest authority for the precept here inculcated ; even that of the Son of God, who in the days of his incarnation, "went down with his parents to Nazareth, and was subject unto them." Here was the inde-

pendence of God making itself dependent on man. What astonishing humility! Accustom yourselves thus to reason. My father is right, and I am wrong. The voice of Christ as your Father is, "My son, give me thine heart." It is your duty as well as your interest to comply with the request, and say, "Take that thine is." Make an unconditional surrender of yourselves into the custody of your Omnipotent Guardian; there is security in no other name under heaven. You cannot confide in Christ too *much*, or in man too *little*. Remember, "he that trusteth his own heart is a fool." I say no more, hoping to have another opportunity of addressing you.

LECTURE II.

Luke xv. 13.

And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living.

WE left the unhappy youth, whose history we are endeavouring to delineate, just on the point of preparing to carry into execution his daring and dangerous, but darling designs. He had succeeded in obtaining the great object of his heart's desire. He was now for the first time, as he imagined, master of himself, and of his property ; the most important person in his own estimation in the creation. He was

resolved on thinking and acting for himself. His pulse beat high in expectation of realizing all those dreams of happiness, which his sanguine imagination had sketched in such vivid colours, and exhibited before his eyes as the only desirable attainment. He was not long in doubt what course to pursue : perchance he argued like the rich fool in the parable ; “ Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years ; take thine ease ; eat, drink, and be merry.” This was the only object he had in view, positive enjoyment. He had soon discernment enough to see, (for the children of this world are wise in their generation,) that there was one grand barrier, which obstructed his path to the temple of his goddess, Pleasure ; namely, his father’s house. Encircled by this domestic enclosure, he was like a favourite bird shorn of its wings, or imprisoned in its cage ; he possessed every thing but liberty. He could not soar into that region of delights which fancy

had depicted. Unshackled he must enter upon his perilous enterprize. He must be free. He must quit his parental roof. No other alternative could be suggested. To remain at home was imprisonment, and death to his expectations. The deed was no sooner suggested than it was carried into execution ; for we read that, “ not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country.” In the peaceful abode in which he had been born and educated, which in days of innocence was his little paradise, he had enjoyed every blessing which an affectionate parent could bestow upon a beloved child : but he had now no relish for scenes like these. He regarded his home as his prison-house, and his father as the keeper ; his relations and domestics as so many links in that chain, which impeded his progress in his pleasurable career. The wholesome restraints of his father’s right-hand, gently pulling him back when he was

disposed to stray ; the silent but well understood rebuke of his father's superintending eye ; the mild expostulation, the salutary admonition, hitherto heard with delight, are now regarded as unwelcome intruders ; enemies to his peace—the murderers of his happiness. He becomes impatient of control ; he will own allegiance to none ; he is proud, insolent, and daring ; and at last defies the authority of his own parent, and altogether withdraws himself from his protection. The remembrance of that paternal solicitude which had watched over him from his cradle to the present moment, is entirely obliterated ; the wound which he is inflicting in his parental bosom by his ungenerous, unnatural conduct, is utterly disregarded. *Self* is the object of his idolatry ; provided *he* is happy, he cares not who is miserable. Fly he must, and fly he does ; not merely from his home, but from the land of his nativity. Like many a discontented man in the present

day, he first quarrels with himself and then with every thing around him; he fancies that happiness is not to be found in his own country, he therefore seeks it in foreign climes. He pronounces a sentence of outlawry upon himself; he becomes a voluntary exile not only from his own shores, but at last from his God; he finds to his cost, that a change of place will not effect a change of nature.

View the subject through the spiritual telescope, and behold the Christian prodigal; I say the Christian prodigal, for it is evident that the parable is intended to illustrate not the case of every sinner, but the mode of Christ's dealing with his church; for though every sinner is a prodigal, yet is not every sinner a penitent. Admitted at an early age by baptism into Christ's church; nursed and cradled in its very bosom; as an incorporated member of Christ's family and household, the son becomes the infant expectant of a glorious inheritance; and

entitled to all the unspeakable privileges of an heir of immortality. Fostered and protected under the mild and peaceable government of his gracious Father, he has only to act in conformity to his laws and be happy ; his safety and welfare depend upon his obedience. But as he advances in manhood, he advances in discontent and restlessness ; he becomes weary and impatient of all those wholesome restraints which religion requires ; he no longer looks upon God as his loving, tender Father ; but sees in him an austere, imperious taskmaster, imposing burdens which he imagines are too heavy for him to bear. He becomes more delighted with, and contracts a greater friendship for, the world ; the love of his Father in the same degree becomes weaker and weaker. He soon perceives that it is impossible to serve God and mammon ; one or the other therefore must be abandoned. Enemies from within and from without, suggest that the yoke which he is now compelled to bear is both

difficult and degrading; that the servitude under which he is now dragging out a miserable existence, is both unprofitable and dishonourable. They recommend him to seek to have his portion in this life, and not to trust to promises of future blessedness which never may be realized. They set before him in most striking colours, the folly of looking to things *unseen*, when what are seen are not only pregnant with present delight, but within the compass of his own grasp. He gives credence to their word. He is dazzled by the anticipation of immediate enjoyment. He seriously meditates a retreat; his object is to obtain possession of all the good things of this world, to which he considers himself entitled by right, as the portion of goods which falleth to him. This is the *first step* in the Christian prodigal's wicked career; the *abandonment of his Father's house*, the house of prayer, the temple of his God. He no longer goes with the rest of the family to unite with

them his voice, in the delightful employment of prayer and praise, but turns his back with contempt upon the scene of their hallowed festivity. He no longer considers the day of his Father, the Sabbath day, a day of delight, holy and honourable to his God ; but he tramples upon it, and despises it as a day of no reputation, as interposing an unnecessary interruption to his pleasurable pursuits. His conduct demonstrates, though his lips be silent, that he has imbibed, and is acting upon, the sentiment of the profane people described in Job, who in speaking of God said, “ Depart from us, for we desire not the knowledge of thy ways.” He exemplifies in his actions that gradation of vice so strikingly delineated by the psalmist. He first of all begins by “ walking in the counsel of the ungodly ;” then he “ stands in the way of sinners ;” and lastly, he “ sits in the seat of the scornful,” and turns religion into ridicule as mere mockery and mummery.

Yes! he would run away if it were possible from his Maker; like guilty Adam, he would try to hide himself from his God; for nothing now is more painful to him than to feel that he is exposed to *His* scrutinizing eye. Yes! he would fly to the utmost part of the earth; he would “take the wings of the morning, and remain in the uttermost parts of the sea;” yea, he would go down to hell itself; if he could be sure that there he could escape the presence and Spirit of his God. But *He* is *there* also. So blinded are sinners as to shun happiness and embrace ruin; to regard the glorious liberty of the sons of God as the greatest slavery; and wish to exchange it for the vile drudgery of vice and of villany. Never, my young friends, let any thing tempt you to stray from your heavenly Father’s house. Be assured, that the farther you recede from that abode of peace and security, the nearer you approach the brink of your own destruction. What Solomon said of

temporal restlessness, and want of stability, is also true of spiritual. "As a bird that wandereth from her nest, so is a man that wandereth from his place." And where is a Christian's place, but the house of God? If we wander from *that*, like Noah's dove we may fly to and fro through the wide expanse of air, but shall find "no rest for the sole of our foot." There is no safety without the ark of God; we are then exposed to all the combined fury of the contending elements. To you it may seem a matter of small moment, a trifling error, a venial offence, that you absent yourselves from the "courts of the Lord's house;" but it is one of the first acts of rebellion against God. It is a virtual denial of *his* authority as a sovereign. It betrays the alienation of the heart from God, which, if not checked, will end in final apostasy.

But let us follow the prodigal son through the remainder of his career. He had quickly decided on the first fatal step.

On the wings of ardent expectation he flew from the walls of his father's prison, as he imagined it to be, and escaped "like a bird from the snare of the fowler," in safety, to the land of liberty and delight. But what was his object in thus travelling to a distant, unknown region? Was it that he might more effectually engage in some honourable pursuit, or more successfully employ the talents committed to his care for his own or his father's advantage? Under such circumstances his flight would not only have been justifiable, it might have been even praiseworthy. But, alas! nothing was more remote from the mind of this headstrong youth. He thought not of his own, or of his father's business. So far from being intent on the profitable expenditure of his property, we read that "he wasted his substance in riotous living." He embarked solely on a tour of pleasure. Self-gratification was his only object, no matter how costly the purchase; he was deter-

mined on selling all he had, to become possessed of this pearl of inestimable value, happiness. He was now at liberty to act for himself. Far removed from the range of parental authority, he had nothing to dread from the effects of parental displeasure. He gave the rein to his unbridled passions, which hurried him on like the impetuous war-horse in the battle, until he fell pierced by the darts of innumerable enemies. Scripture history does not acquaint us with the particulars of the licentious career of this unhappy son ; but it is easy, and it is lawful in the present instance to follow him, in imagination, through some of the scenes, in which he strutted away, as the principal actor upon the platform of iniquity. When a young man first quits the threshold of his parental roof, and enters upon the journey of life, with an abundance of money at his command, he will soon be surrounded by a host of plunderers, who have no other object in view than to enrich themselves

at his expense. They will say to him, "Cast in thy lot with us, we will do thee good ;" and unless restrained by sanctified reason and religion, he will inevitably become the dupe of all the wiles which treachery can devise. Ignorant of himself, ignorant of the world, unacquainted with the depravity and deceitfulness of his own heart, he suspects not, and is unprepared for deception in others. He measures all mankind by a standard of his own erecting, and detects no deficiency. We can conceive a host of such characters awaiting the arrival of this unhappy prodigal in that distant country whither he travelled, ready to pounce upon him with all the avidity of a vulture on its prey ; for "where the carcase is, there will the eagles be gathered together." He fell an easy and willing victim, into the snare which had been so artfully prepared for his destruction. We may fairly imagine that he becomes the companion of thieves and harlots ; that he launches forth into

all those acts of debauchery and intemperance, the bare mention of which would once, when under his father's roof, have filled him with horror. His whole life may be said to be a continued round of sitting down to eat and to drink, and rising up to play. He attempts to fix no bounds to his appetite; he lives only to gratify the "lust of the flesh, the lust of the eye, and the pride of life." Solomon, in the seventh chapter of his book of Proverbs, has given a most interesting picture of a young man, led astray by the wicked designs of an abandoned woman, into whose evening walks he had thrown himself; for the purpose of availing himself of the cover of the night, for the perpetration of an act, which he was unwilling the sun should witness. We recommend the passage to the serious contemplation of those young men who may trace their own resemblance in the picture before them. It is more adapted for meditation in private, than for publication from the pulpit. The

character which Solomon gives of this unhappy youth is strongly described, and deserves our particular attention. "I beheld," said he, "among the simple ones, a young man *void of understanding* ;" and in another place he designates those who "make a mock at sin, as *fools* ;" although they consider themselves as alone the wise men of the earth, and treat with ridicule and contempt the humble worshipper of Israel's God. Thus, no doubt, the unhappy prodigal thought and acted. He congratulated himself upon his superior sagacity in having discovered for himself a smooth flowery path, instead of the thorny track along which he once travelled, which seemed to goad his feet at almost every step ; and if the name of Solomon ever occurred to him, he reprobated his folly for saying that "wisdom's ways," that is, the ways of religion, are the only "ways of pleasantness." It is true that he probably had some occasional pangs of remorse, for sober intervals men

must and will have. They cannot always be in a tavern, nor always in company. The voice of the "Lord God will be heard in the cool of the day;" but this voice is soon silenced and stifled: or if not, it is sought again to be drowned in the cup of intoxication, until at last it yields the contest, for "the Spirit will not always strive with man."

Here, then, take your stand, and gaze upon this man of pleasure, "drawing," as the prophet says, "sin as it were with a cart rope," drinking in iniquity like water, "committing all uncleanness with greediness." He was now in possession of all that his heart could desire. Yet in what did his happiness consist? He revelled in all the pleasures of intoxication; possibly he defiled the marriage bed, seduced and ruined unsuspecting innocence, squandered away his property at the gaming table; he had the pleasure of laughing at the laws of his country, at the religion of his fathers, at all rules of decency and

virtue, at every body who would not run with him to the same excess of riot ; perhaps too, he had the gratification of blaspheming the name of the God who made him. Is this a mark of wisdom, a proof of understanding ? Yet this was the consummation of the prodigal's imaginary bliss ; he had no other title to happiness than that which we have read. How true is the remark, " there is a way which seemeth right unto man, but the end thereof are the ways of death." Think you, brethren, that the prodigal stands alone in the world ? or that he has no similitude among the young men of this generation ? Would that it were so ! Would that the Redeemer was portraying only an imaginary picture ! Could the walls of this metropolis speak, they would tell us of many such unhappy children confined within their enclosure ; wanderers from their home, and from their God. Some we fear are eternally lost ; but others, like the prodigal, will find

their way back to their Father's house. How many are there "who *did* run well, but Satan hindered them." The fairest flowers which once expanded their petals to the sun, in some little domestic plantation, with all the promise of becoming its brightest ornaments, have been suddenly blasted and withered when transplanted into the wilderness of the world. They have been unable to sustain the removal. The soil has proved so uncongenial to spiritual vegetation, and the atmosphere so destructive to spiritual life, that if they have not absolutely drooped and died, they have brought forth no fruit to perfection; they have become therefore useless and unprofitable. The Spirit of God alone is competent to the great work of resurrection. How many young persons of both sexes have arrived in this metropolis, having quitted their parental roof, some from necessity; others from choice; not a few, perhaps, by stealth, attracted hither by false expectations, which have allured

them from their home, to the inexpressible anguish of their afflicted friends, who mourn the consequences of their temerity. It may be that these children have brought with them all the habits and seeds of early piety, which, implanted by a tender mother, and watered by her tears, have grown with their growth, and afforded a rich prospect of a glorious harvest in the appointed season. On launching forth into this sea of troubles and ocean of iniquity, the minds of these youthful voyagers are impressed with sorrow and dismay at the scenes which they are called upon to witness ; so different from the piety and comparative purity of the rural retreat they have just left, the abode of all that once was near and dear to them. Sabbaths profaned, God dishonoured, *his* name blasphemed, *his* laws despised, iniquity abounding, vice triumphant, virtue vanquished, lying prostrate in the dust. These are the things which force from the hearts of these inexperienced travellers

many a groan, and from their eyes many a tear. But alas ! these honourable feelings are but of short duration. They soon begin to regard with indifference and apathy, what they so recently contemplated with disgust and horror. They reconcile themselves to passing events, under cover of the misapplied proverb, "that what cannot be cured must be endured." New companions are formed, new principles are imbibed. Their former serious notions are ridiculed, voted either altogether obsolete, or as only adapted to the sick or dying chamber. The poison of infidelity is secretly instilled into their veins, which soon rapidly is diffused over the whole system, stagnating and putrefying the fountain of life. Now commences the first act of their delinquency : they leave their heavenly Father's house. They are no longer on each returning sabbath to be found in the sanctuary of God. They withdraw themselves from the protection of God, and own no allegiance to

him. They no longer pray to him in public or in private. His word ceases to be the rule of their life, and his Spirit the guide and consolation of their life. They throw aside, as a thing of no reputation, as degrading and derogatory to their dignity, the mantle of Christ's religion, and seek to be arrayed in some gorgeous apparel, purchased at a costly price, from the temple of fashion.

Having thus surmounted all the barriers which early habits, reason, and religion interpose, as the safeguards of their reputation, their honour, and their lives; no longer regarding either God or man; like the swine of the Gergesenes, under the maddening influence of the devils, they run violently down the steep places of iniquity into the sea of perdition, and are drowned in the ocean of eternal misery. Their professional avocations are now, for the most part, or entirely, abandoned, or pursued only as a matter of drudgery or compulsion, to keep up an

appearance among their friends. The gratification of their passions is the sole object for which they seem to live ; every thing else is made subservient to this unhallowed purpose. The theatre, the ball-room, the gaming table, the brothel, or the tavern, consume their strength, their time, and their property. They would try to subvert the laws of nature, and convert night into day, and day into night, shunning as it were the light of the sun, because their deeds are evil. They withhold nothing from their possession which can gratify the eye, satiate the palate, or administer to their sensuality. Their maxim is to live while they live, to drown their cares in the vortex of pleasure, to enjoy the present moment as if futurity (if such there should be,) never would arrive ; to banish the fear of death by investing life with all the charms which imagination can conceive or luxury supply. Thus in every respect they personate the character of the unhappy youth

in the parable, and become prodigal and profligate in the worst and most extensive meaning of the appellation.

Be assured, my dear young friends, that this is no imaginary or highly-coloured picture, placed before your eyes merely to scare you from your delights. It is a faithful delineation of many an unhappy boy at this moment, playing the part which is here assigned him. Perhaps even within these walls there may be at this moment *one* who has come hither in contempt and ridicule, who may recognize his own likeness in the mirror held up to his view. If such there should be, I would arrest him in his progress, and detain him within these walls ; I would beseech him not to be terrified at the features of deformity which he sees exhibited, nor to be dismayed at the hand-writing recorded against him. Though I would have him disgusted at the representation, I would not drive him to despair. I would rather entreat him to accompany us throughout

the remainder of these Lectures, and then we shall endeavour to show, that frightful as his present appearance may be, from which all persons shrink with disgust ; he may yet be transformed by divine grace into an image of beauty and loveliness which all will admire ; that a new creation may yet take place in his soul, so that he may entirely be divested of what is old in corruption and dead in sin, and come forth in all the freshness and newness of life, a glorious specimen of divine workmanship in Christ Jesus. I would lead him to see that the doors of his Father's house are not closed upon him for ever ; that the wandering, wayward prodigal may yet become the returning penitent obedient son, and be welcomed back again to his home and his God. I would endeavour to perform the office of the good Samaritan, and while beholding the youthful traveller wallowing in the mire, bleeding and wounded with satan's darts, more than half dead in his trespasses and

sins ; I would pour the oil of joy and gladness into the putrefying sores. I would administer the restorative balm, and convey him to that Physician, who has only to speak the word to ensure a complete restoration to strength and to life. But why do I apply the term prodigal only to the unhappy subject of this parable, or to any one particular class of persons ? We are all prodigals by nature—prodigality and humanity are inseparably connected. We seize upon the portion of goods which has been allotted to us by our heavenly Father, and appropriate it at best to *our own*, but most commonly to the service of satan. We have been prodigal of our time, our talents, our property, our strength, our energies ; wasting our substance, if not in riotous, at least in useless and unprofitable living ; expending it merely in the advancement, as we conceive, of our worldly interests ; more intent in promoting our own, than the glory of God. Arguing in the ge-

nuine spirit of infidelity, "that we have a right to do what we will with our own," we dedicate our Master's property to purposes of self-aggrandisement, and self-gratification ; in fact, committing a robbery on God to enrich ourselves. Indulge then no longer the spirit of self-congratulation, that because you are not prodigals to the same extent, or after the similitude of the young man whose history we are now sketching, that you are therefore exempt altogether from the charge of prodigality. No ! let us plead guilty to the general bill of indictment, and throw ourselves on the mercy of our justly offended, but reconciled, Father in Christ Jesus.

Do the Scriptures then forbid all prodigality ? just the reverse ; there is a species which they strongly recommend and enforce. They exhort us to be prodigal of our prayers, of our praises, of our alms, of our penitential tears ; of the expenditure of our strength

and energies in the service of our Redeemer. They require us to consecrate all we have received to the service of the donor. Here it is that profusion is extolled ; for we can never do enough for Him who has done so much for us. Prodigality of this kind will tend to enrichment not to poverty ; it will ennoble and exalt, not degrade or debase, the Christian character. I call then upon you all ; the man with the ten talents, and the man with the one talent, to an act of prodigality in the service of your Redeemer. Expend all that you have ; all your portion, whether of property or of vitality, freely and profusely for your Master's honour and glory. Look at Gethsemane's garden. Look at Calvary's cross. Then if you can, if you are base enough, if you are hardy enough, waste your substance in riotous living ; but mark the consequence ! Know " that for all these things God will bring you into judgment." But I would not leave you

at the judgment-seat, without showing you the way to the mercy-seat. I need not bespeak your attendance here again, for the readiness with which you assemble together proves, that you are as willing to hear as I am to preach. Should we be permitted to conclude our course of lectures, we shall prove that our object is to humble you merely to exalt you ; to conduct you all to the knowledge of him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. May God of his infinite mercy grant, that many of you who are now assembled before me, may be enabled to exclaim, “ We have found *Him* of whom Moses in the law and the prophets did write,” Jesus Christ the righteous ; and experimentally know him to be our God, our Father and our Saviour.

LECTURE III.

Luke xv. 14, 15, 16.

And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land ; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country ; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine : and he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat : and no man gave unto him.

WE introduce you this evening to the prodigal youth basking in the sunshine of his prosperity ; like the great Leviathan rolling about and taking his pastime in the ocean of his delights. Unfettered, and unrestrained by a parent's eye, he was

now enabled to give the rein to his unbridled appetite. But was he happy? To be quite happy we must do every thing, have every thing, and be every thing that we can wish. We must be unconfined in our powers, unlimited in our possessions, and infinite in our nature. We must exchange our dependency as creatures for the independency of the Creator, and become nothing less than deity itself. It is folly therefore to attempt to discover complete happiness; though the object is pursued by many with as much ardour as if it were attainable. Of course, we now speak of *earthly* happiness. Thanks be to God for the discovery in Christ Jesus, there is a positive, complete happiness which is attainable, but not on earth; where there will be the consummation of bliss, the perfection of pleasure, in the presence and in the possession of deity. "There are," says the pious Cecil, "but two states in the world which may be pronounced

happy ; either that of the man who rejoices in the light of God's countenance, or that of him who mourns after it." But was this spendthrift even as happy as he anticipated ? We may safely answer in the negative ; for in the pursuit of worldly enjoyment how rarely does it happen that we realize even half the workings of our imagination ! Some one thing is always wanting which eludes our grasp. This one deficiency makes us miserable. Like a spoiled child who tramples upon all its playthings because some one thing is refused, we are ready to quarrel with the ninety-and-nine blessings we possess, because the hundredth is not within our immediate compass. But admit, if you please, that this prodigal was not disappointed in the expectations he had formed of earthly bliss ; there was one thing on which he had not calculated--that it was to be short in its duration. The means of self-gratification were soon exhausted ; the fountain of his felicity was about to

be dried up by the sun of prosperity. We have read “that he wasted his substance in riotous living.”

This is one prominent feature which is characteristic of youth, *thoughtlessness, want of consideration, disregard of futurity*; so that the generality of young men, having miserably perverted the meaning, rigidly adhere to the letter of our Lord’s admonition, “Take no thought for the morrow, for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.” Present enjoyment is their exclusive object; and with the sentiment and recklessness of infidelity, they “live each day as ’twere the last.” Their conduct proves, without the confession of the lips, that this is their doctrine, “Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die.” Such was the case with the prodigal in the parable. Ignorant of the world, unacquainted with the nature and value of property, he knew not how soon riches take to themselves wings and fly away. Little

did he conceive the instability and uncertainty of human glory, and human happiness ; that they flit from our eyes as a vision of the night. But this lesson he was immediately and painfully to learn. He was about to feel the effects of his precipitation and waywardness.

We have hitherto been occupied in viewing his *imaginary* prosperity ; we will now solicit your attention to his *real poverty* and *degradation*. We are informed “ that when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in the land, and he began to be in want.” How rapid and easy is the descent from the summit of human grandeur to the depth of human misery ! This was the natural result of the young man’s profligacy ; but he perceived it not, until it was forced upon his attention by painful experience. What an alteration in our position will a few hours only effect ! Who can tell what to-morrow may produce ? Here is an individual one moment revelling in all the

luxury and splendour which wealth can purchase ; in a few days afterwards reduced to the greatest extremity of want and wretchedness. And what added to his affliction, was, that there arose, not a common, but a “mighty famine in the land.” Hunger under any circumstances is a burden difficult to be borne : but how much are its horrors augmented, when it is immediately consequent on extravagant profusion, and has been occasioned by extravagant conduct ! Such was the case in the instance before us ; the young man was the author of his own misery ; his own suicidal hands had prepared for himself the instruments of destruction. He had no where to lay the blame but upon himself ; for although there was a great famine in the land, yet with his ample property, and with common prudence, it is more than probable that he would have been raised at least above the pressure of want. But now he stands in need even of the necessaries of life : so that although

the famine contributed to increase, it did not occasion his wretchedness. He possessed within himself all the means of a comfortable subsistence, probably for the period of a long life ; but he preferred squandering the whole away, perhaps, in a few months, in excess and debauchery. In the language of the world, he determined to live *well*, if he did not live *long*. This is the condition to which every prodigal, sooner or later, must be reduced ; waste will inevitably lead to want. Indeed our Lord himself reads us a lesson of economy, and guards us against a wasteful spirit : for after having fed the multitude to satiety in the wilderness, he bids the attendants “gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost.” What to us in one situation of life would be scraps and refuse, in another would afford a delicious morsel, which we should be glad to purchase at almost any price, for the sustenance of our bodies.

This, then, is another step of his down-

fall which the profligate descended—*poverty* even to the extremity of want.

The next in this scale of wretchedness, was *degradation*. We are informed that “he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine ; and he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat ; and no man gave unto him.” To what extremities are men driven by their folly and wickedness. To dig he could not ; possibly he had so debilitated himself by his debaucheries, that he was unfit for hard manual labour ; and to beg he was probably ashamed. He had recourse, therefore, to the only expedient in his power ; that of offering his services, feeble and ineffectual as they were, to any individual who had compassion enough to accept them. He was glad to “ crouch to any one for a morsel of bread.” He met with a citizen, who probably seeing his wretched appearance, and judging him incapable of laborious

occupation, sent him into the fields to perform that most degrading and disgusting employment, the attendance upon swine. Had he assigned him a situation as shepherd, the post would have been one of honour and distinction; such as had been occupied by some of the most remarkable scripture characters, as Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and David. But to feed the swine, was indeed an act of servility, to which nothing short of beggary would stoop; for these animals were deemed by their law to be most unclean, and polluting to the touch. Yet were the white delicate hands of this prodigal, unaccustomed even to administer to his own wants, required to cater for the bestial appetite of that animal, the very name of which was odious to the Jew. Nor was this the whole of his degradation. Such were the cravings of hunger, that coarse and revolting as the husks were, yet he would have been glad to have appeased the irritation of a corroded sto-

mach with such miserable diet ; yet even this was denied him. “ No man gave unto him,” and he was deterred either by a principle of fear, or honesty, from robbing the swine to feed himself. Wretched, unhappy man that he was ! He who a short time before had enjoyed every delicacy and luxury which riches could procure, is now not permitted to make a meal with the swine which he is sent to attend. What a sight is here ! A man so lately “ clothed in purple and fine linen, and faring sumptuously every day,” now ready to quarrel with the swine for their disgusting garbage ; yet even this trivial gratification of sitting down to meat with the brutes of the earth was not permitted. His arbitrary, cruel master ranked him lower even than the vilest of the beasts which perish. Misery itself can scarcely imagine an object more pitiable than this unhappy youth ; without a home, without friends ; of whom it might be said, that no man cared either

for his soul or body. He was probably regarded with contempt by some who beheld him, but as an object of compassion by all. Here, then, let us pause awhile, and contemplate this humiliating portrait of self-delusion and self-degradation.

If, my young friends, you have been at all tempted to behold, with invidious eyes, the prodigal when in the zenith of his prosperity, in possession of all his riches ; what now must be your emotions on gazing upon the wreck of his happiness ; and seeing the stream of his life strewn with shivered fragments of scattered property, shattered health, dissipated honours, blasted prospects ? Be assured that a similar fate awaits all those who are determined on embarking on a similar voyage of discovery in search of happiness. They will return, if permitted to return, wrecked in reputation, property and person. Perhaps I am addressing, at this moment, some individual who *has* already, or *is* about, to engage in the pe-

rilous enterprise. At all events, we must pull our bow at a venture, not knowing whither the arrow may direct its course; we shall, however, aim at piercing the heart of some reckless wanderer with striking convictions. Poverty and hunger are the first and most pressing assailants at the door of profligacy and extravagance. They will take no denial, their importunities cannot be disregarded; no stratagem or artifice can elude their vigilance. On the first failure of the resources of the unhappy spendthrift, these unwelcome visitors are demanding admittance; and it not unfrequently happens that he who has revelled in all the luxury of the land, would gladly be permitted to gather up the crumbs which fall from some rich, or even some poor man's table; but none will give unto him. He has the mortification of finding himself an outcast from society. Could we penetrate with the eye of omniscience into all the scenes of wretchedness which

this metropolis could disclose, we should discover many a child of sorrow enduring unspeakable sufferings; sometimes the result of unforeseen and unavoidable occurrences; but more frequently originating in conduct the most improvident, if not the most profligate and licentious. We could unfold to your view such disclosures of pain and poverty, the bare recital of which would elicit a tear of sympathy from every hearer; in which the principal actors are those who have played some of the first characters in the great theatre of life, but are now pining away a miserable existence in the darkest obscurity, alike unknowing and unknown—"the world forgetting by the world forgot!" But to the Christian prodigal there is something far more painful than these bodily deprivations. The *spiritual* deprivations of the soul—these are infinitely more acutely felt and deplored, inasmuch as the soul is more precious than the body; eternal misery more to be dreaded

than temporal. God speaking by the mouth of his prophet Amos, saith, “ Behold, the days come that I will send a famine in the land ; not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.” This is the famine most to be apprehended, and which, in the moments of serious reflection, the Christian prodigal most particularly laments. He mourns over the loss of the bread of life, and the water of life, which alone are capable of affording nourishment to his soul ; and for want of which, all is coldness, unprofitableness, desolation, deadness. There is, indeed, a famine in the land ; a scarcity of divine grace in the soul. He has made himself a spiritual bankrupt ; he has wasted his substance by his riotous conduct : he has rejected the mercies of God, and all his gifts which were so profusely presented to him ; he has turned the grace of God into licentiousness ; he has quenched the operations of the Holy Spirit, by the

waters of iniquity ; he has drowned the voice of conscience in the stream of sensual gratification. And for what has he bartered away these spiritual treasures ? For a little pleasure falsely so called ; for the baubles and trifles of life, which are light as air, when compared with the substantial joys of eternity. Like Esau, he has sold his inestimable privileges, his hereditary advantages, for a mess of pottage ; the mere momentary gratification of his carnal appetites. I know that it is difficult to persuade those, who are strangers to the feeling, that more horrible pangs are the attendants on spiritual famine : they ridicule the notion as absurd ; nay, so complete is the delusion, they sometimes fancy that they are fed to satiety ; are fat and well-liking, and see not that they are “ poor, and destitute, and naked.” But when their eyes are opened, like those of our first parents, to see their nakedness and destitution, there is nought in time which can satisfy their cravings ; there is

no garment which the world can afford which can conceal their deformity and cover their nakedness ; they are, indeed, of all persons the most miserable. Nor is their *degradation* less apparent, or more feebly deplored than their poverty.

We have seen into what an abyss of shame and servitude the prodigal had lowered himself. A similar chasm is opening to receive all those who are treading in his steps. The path of vain glory at best leads but to the grave ; and the intermediate stages are often through the valley of humiliation and the slough of despond. There are multitudes at this moment either performing some of the most menial offices of life, or are compelled to beg their bread from door to door, as the penalty of their own imprudence and intemperance, whose society was once courted by the votaries of fashion ; while others, more reckless of consequences, and more hardened in iniquity, have sought to repair their resources at the gaming table ;

or else have perpetrated crimes which have ended in the loss of their liberty, and not unfrequently of their lives. “Many,” as the prophet Jeremiah says, “that did feed delicately, are desolate in the streets; they that were brought up in scarlet, embrace dunghills.” Calculate not, my young friends, as many have done only to their disappointment, that in the hour of destitution, you will not be left alone; that your former acquaintance and associates will flock around you, vying with each other to be first to open for your reception their houses, or to place at your command their person, or their property. Alas! such is neither the habit nor the friendship of the world. From the christianized portion of mankind you will meet with a share of sympathy; perchance some unknown benefactor, to whom the particulars of your situation have been communicated, will endeavour to mitigate its severity; among those one may be found who will “stick

closer than a brother ;” though this friend must be sought for in heaven, in the person of Christ Jesus. The world in general will act the part of the Levite, “and look on, but pass by on the other side.” What advantage did the young man in the parable gain from all his train of boasted friends, who ate and drank with him at his table, and had contributed to encompass his degradation? Were their kindly hands now stretched forth to extricate him from his difficulties? Finding that the source of their enjoyments was dried up, and that reproach and disgrace had usurped the place which credit and honour had formerly occupied in connexion with his name, they turned their backs upon him, and left him to struggle alone, with the billows of adversity breaking over his head. This, be assured, is an exact representation of human friendship. “Men will praise thee,” as saith the psalmist, “when thou doest well to thyself.” So long as we can adminis-

ter to the enjoyment of others, we shall never want a crowd of admirers, and a host of flatterers. But let the scene be changed; let poverty succeed to riches, destitution to affluence; one by one our companions will desert us, until we are left alone unpitied, the scorn and derision of all those who are round about us: nay, many will contemptuously disown any connexion or acquaintance with us; and with the audacity of the apostle of old, when taxed with the discipleship of Christ, will exclaim, perhaps with the oath and with the curse, "I know not the man." Such is the friendship of the world; and all who have been foolish enough to court its alliance, can bear me testimony that it smiles only to deceive; that it is as false as it is fair.

But there is a state of *moral* and *spiritual degradation* even still more to be deplored. It is a delusion to conceive that those who cast off allegiance to God, and who will submit to none of those

salutary restraints which religion imposes, are altogether free and independent—liberated from every yoke. They are the veriest and vilest of slaves which imagination can depict ; they are rivetted to the earth by chains the most oppressive, the most galling, and the most debasing. One of two masters we must serve ; either Him “ whose service is perfect freedom ;” the great omnipotent Jehovah ; or him who is called by way of distinction the god of this world ; who rules his subjects with an iron sceptre. When once we withdraw ourselves from the paternal government of the merciful Jehovah, other lords will instantly get the dominion over us ; and we shall be led captive by satan at his will : nay, we shall be the slaves of many masters—slaves to ourselves, the worst of masters—to our own lusts and passions—our unhallowed appetites and unlawful imaginations—all contending for absolute sovereignty, and harassing us both by day and by night, until their con-

tradictory but unceasing demands are satiated. Well might the apostle ask this question, "When ye were the servants of sin, what fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed?" What more debasing, more brutalizing, than pandering to the gratification of our inordinate affections, and evil concupiscence? What cringing must be resorted to; what servility must be endured; what baseness and stratagems practised, before the adulterous bed can be ascended, or female innocence defiled! Nay, so sensibly does the adulterer feel the baseness and degrading quality of the action he is perpetrating, that it is usually wrought under cover of midnight darkness. He avoids the light of the sun, and the light of Christianity, lest his deed should proclaim that it is wrought by diabolical agency. Then again, what more swinish or brutalizing than drowning the senses in the cup of intoxication? How foul, how really oppressive is the servitude of

this vice ! It degrades us in the scale of creation lower even than the beasts that perish. We may thus run through the whole catalogue of iniquity, but we must arrive at the same conclusion—that, in the eye of every sober man—in the opinion of every christianized mind—in the estimation of God himself, the most abject, servile character that dishonours the earth, is the votary of pleasure, the man of fashion, and the man of sin. Yet all the time he boasts of his liberty, and thinks that he alone is entitled to the term happy, and wise, and free. But the tongue of inspiration hath pronounced him to be both a fool and a slave. Where “the Spirit of the Lord is,” not of satan, “there alone is liberty.”

But what were the *benefits* to be derived from this servitude, and what were the commensurate wages to be bestowed by this imperious tyrant ? Just what might have been expected—a mere nominal advantage, an imaginary good.

A little sensual pleasure, a little empty honour, a little vain glory—mere *husks* in comparison with the substantial fare which religion and the feast of a good conscience will surely provide. Scraps and refuse, when contrasted with that “meat which endures unto everlasting life.” Nor even of these can the servants of satan gain a sufficiency; for there is something unsatisfactory in them when possessed, and so fleeting in their nature, that a thousand circumstances may scatter them in a moment. Yet said the devil to his credulous victims, “All these things will I give you,” that is, all whatsoever the world calls good, “if you will only fall down and worship me.” But he was a liar from the beginning, and promises only to deceive; for the ungodly are disappointed even in this world’s possessions; they often find, like the prodigal, that there is no man to give unto them. “The husks,” says an old writer, “of this world, are good enough for the

swine which feed upon them ; but the citizens of heaven require some more substantial fare." Yet for these gilded trifles do multitudes barter the unsearchable and imperishable riches of Christ. Now this is just that sort of food which the world is administering to you, my young friends, at the present moment ; but because it is presented to you in a lordly dish, you think that you may taste thereof, nay, partake of it largely, and live.

The principles which are sought to be inculcated in the present day by the emissaries of satan, with such persevering industry, will be found, on a minute examination, to be subversive of all that is Christian in doctrine, pure in principle, and holy in practice. There is a spurious species of liberality, and of latitudinarianism, which would dilute down to the standard of fallen humanity all the communications of the Spirit of God, of which the Scriptures are the depositary ; so that every doctrine of revelation which cannot

be comprehended by our limited understandings, is rejected as an article of faith; an unlawful test of modern Christianity, improper to compose the creed of a Christian population. Hence the attempt to fritter away the foundation-stone of the Christian church—the divinity of the Saviour, and the triune nature of Jehovah:—hence the daring assaults against that structure, which hitherto hath defied, and, in spite of diabolical malignity, will continue to defy, the gates of hell itself. Who sees not in all these transactions the spirit of infidelity, seeking to blast with its withering influence some of the fairest plants in the Christian nursery? We see it whithersoever we turn—in our various publications, religious as well as irreligious. We see it in many of our daily, but particularly Sunday journals; we see it in our public assemblies—at the bar, the senate, and at the theatre; aye, and occasionally in the pulpit, at the church, where there

is too much attempt to seek popularity at the expense of principle—to secularize religion—to make it amalgamate with worldly practice. “The church,” says the venerable Cecil,” has endured a pagan and a papal persecution; there remains for her an infidel persecution, general, bitter, purifying, cementing.” This prediction I verily believe is in course of fulfilment. The pride of intellect is the object of idolatrous worship, before whose altar, the time, the talents, the energies of the rising generation are to be immolated. The cry has gone forth, whatever else you get, get knowledge. Knowledge is power; knowledge is wealth; knowledge is independence; knowledge is every thing; therefore get knowledge. We are ready to join in the general cry; but then we say, let it be *sanctified knowledge*. We do not fear the legitimate use, but the *abuse* of knowledge. Let human wisdom be made subservient to divine revelation. Esteem every other species

of knowledge, however essential to the formation of the gentleman and scholar, as entirely nugatory, or worse than nugatory, unless it be accompanied with a knowledge of yourselves, and of Jesus Christ and him crucified. Let the mind be well stored with sound scriptural principles and scriptural promises ; then, if you please, build upon these a superstructure of human literature ; otherwise you will be expending your strength and energies upon the baseless fabric of a vision, which the first breath of adversity will dissipate into air.

One part of our ministerial office is to provide proper food for our flock. If you come to us beseeching bread, we will not give you a stone. We will not treat you as swine and feed you with husks ; but we will set before you all the rich, wholesome nutriment provided in the gospel ; and tell you that unless you “eat the flesh of the Son of man,” and partake of the bread of life, and drink the water of life,

ye shall surely die. Do not, then, my dear young friends, take “the children’s bread and cast it to the dogs,” as a thing of no reputation. “Know how to refuse the evil and choose the good;” otherwise there will be a mighty famine in the land; you will be in want, and perish with hunger. Behold, then, the rich, ample provision for your spiritual sustenance in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ! Hungry and thirsty, your souls fainting within you, here you may be fed to satiety. Oh! reject not our invitations, lest it be found that with suicidal impiety you have destroyed yourselves, and die of a spiritual atrophy in the midst of gospel superabundance.

Here then we stop; but our picture of prodigality is not yet completed; there is one feature more to be exhibited, which may have escaped your observation; but if you will favour us with your attendance again at our next lecture, we will attempt to delineate it; and then to show the first

dawning of the prodigal's amendment. Retire to your respective houses; seriously meditate on what has been said, and may God give you a right understanding in all things, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

LECTURE IV.

LUKE XV. 17.

*And when he came to himself, he said,
How many hired servants of my father's
have bread enough and to spare,
and I perish with hunger !*

PAINFUL as it has been to contemplate the unhappy picture of prodigality as exhibited in the passage before us, we would, however, hope that it has kindled in your minds a horror of sin. It cannot but excite our compassion to behold the time, the talents, the energies, of one who might have been an ornament to his country, prostituted to the vilest of purposes, and converting him into its bane and curse. Yet repulsive as the object unquestionably is, the portrait of misery,

and degradation, is incomplete. One very important feature remains to be inserted, in order that the resemblance to the original may be accurately traced. We behold something more than the effects of folly or of youthful levity; we see in the character before us actually the workings of a madman, and we are fully justified in this assertion by the expression in the text, “when he *came to himself*,” which evidently implies that hitherto he had been *beside* himself; bereft of his reason, acting under the impulse of a feverish and frenzied brain. This is the *last point* we would notice in the consummation of the prodigal’s wretchedness; the climax of misery—his *delirium* and his *madness*. The man of pleasure, the libertine, in his own estimation, is alone entitled to the designation of a wise man; but the pen of inspiration hath declared him to be a fool; a man void of understanding—a madman. Almost every action of his life denotes an aberration of

intellect; a state of mental degradation, which does not even rise so high as the instinct of the beasts that perish. “The ox knows his owner, and the horse his master’s crib;” but this fool knows nothing of *his* owner, the God who has a property in him, and who still, notwithstanding his waywardness, continues to feed him; or if he knows him, he does not *consider* him. He seeks not his daily sustenance at the hand of his Master, but in the haughty spirit of impiety attempts to live independently of all, even of his God.

Which of the brutes of the earth seeks to encompass the destruction of his own life, and pursues a course which must be detrimental to his existence? Is not the preservation and elongation of life the first law of our nature; the primary object of attainment by the whole animal creation? Yet this fool, with all his fancied superiority of wisdom, is sporting with suicidal weapons, and is digging for himself a grave with his own hands,

to contain the diseased fragments of a prematurely decayed body. Our Lord asks this question, “How much better is a man than a sheep?” In some respects he is infinitely worse, and betrays a far greater degree of folly than even this proverbially simple animal ; but with all its simplicity, it knows its best friend, and hears and understands the voice of the shepherd. But this fool shuts his ears, and hardens his heart against the calls of the *best* of friends, and will not attend to His monitory, parental, voice ; but with an equal degree of folly and infidelity, he drowns his senses in the ocean of his delights, and renders himself insensible to any call but that of death, which he is only accelerating, and whose accents he *must* hear, and instantly obey. Solomon says, that “madness is in the heart of sinners ;” and so it is ; for their extravagant conduct is to be accounted for on no other principle. What does St. Paul say of himself, when in his impious zeal he

tried to extirpate the whole race of Christians? He confessed that "he was exceedingly *mad* against them and persecuted them." In what other way can we account for his rash, impetuous conduct? It seems but an act of common charity to say of him, that he knew not what he did.

Is the Christian prodigal then more rational? Does he act in a manner which denotes greater soundness of intellect? Nay, rather is he not a maniac of the first order; of all men the most insane and the most to be pitied? See him sporting with heavenly things, with all the levity and puerility of a child who takes no interest in any thing but its toys and playthings; who would barter even these, precious as they are in his estimation, for a momentary gratification of a novel or higher order. See the prodigal trampling under his feet the crown of glory and sceptre of righteousness, with as little apparent concern as if he were walking upon a vain shadow; nay, here is the ma-

nifest token of his egregious insanity ; he pursues the shadow with ten times more ardour than he does the substance ; he prefers the visionary delusion of the imagination to the absolute possession of the solid materials ; he actually exchanges the uncertain and imperishable riches of Christ, for a small bag of counterfeit coin ; which, although it may bear externally some resemblance to the lawful money of the king, is in reality refuse and worthless. O ! we pity the insanity of those who are endeavouring, with ceaseless and breathless ardour, to gain possession of some fancied good, which ten thousand circumstances may in a moment snatch from their enjoyment, or perhaps convert into an instrument of self-destruction. We mourn over the folly of those, who with all their energies are seeking to “ make provision for time, as if it would never end, and for eternity, as if it would never begin.” Where are they to be placed ? In reality, they have a greater

claim upon our compassion, and infinitely more need our superintendence, than some of those wretched individuals who are incarcerated within the confines of our lunatic asylums. Many more deeds of insanity are committed without those walls, by men who have a reputation for wisdom, than are perpetrated within that inclosure, which philanthropy has erected, for the reception of such as are avowedly pronounced unfit to be thrown loose upon society, or entrusted with their own custody. Yet do we find them pursuing a course which would infallibly ensure their *eternal* ruin? The utmost we can say of them is, that if left to themselves they might encompass their *present* destruction. But the spiritual prodigal, in a state far more demented, is rushing forwards to precipitate himself into an abyss of misery, which will destroy both body and soul in hell. Who in possession of his faculties would labour day and night to make himself miserable to all eternity, when he

might ensure, with far less trouble, an eternity of happiness? Who, not bereft of his reason, would prefer the carnal enjoyment of a brute to the spiritual delights of an angel, nay, of God himself? We libel not, then, the prodigal, when we say of him, that he is a *madman*. But it was self-created madness, the natural, if not necessary result, of his licentious and intemperate conduct. He was the author of his own misery. He wished to become his own master, but the event proved, that he was his own slave. If God were to abandon us to ourselves only for a few moments, we should have little occasion to boast of the superiority either of our intellect or of our reason. “Man being in honour,” says the psalmist, “may be compared to the beasts that perish.” He might have added that he will be surpassed in wisdom by the beasts that perish—that the comparison will be greatly to man’s disadvantage.

In this moral frenzy, then, was the prodigal in the parable. His whole conduct proves the excited state of his brain, even to madness. Indeed, to this very hour the sentiment has become proverbial ; for when we see an individual abandoning himself to profligate, licentious habits, gratifying his unlawful passions at the expense of all that he possesses, his property and his life, we commonly say of him, that he must be *mad*.

We have now completed the painful part of our subject, our picture of human depravity and its consequent misery. We shall in future be occupied with the more pleasing task of attempting to delineate a faint sketch of divine mercy. We have not sought to portray the character before us in any other than its natural colours ; or to call in the aid of embellishment or imagination, to make the portrait of deformity more revolting ; we have merely attempted to lay before you a simple exhibition of natural corruption,

as it meets our eye in the person of the unhappy prodigal. We have traced him through all the wiles and intricacies of his vicious career, and beheld him playing many parts on the stage of life ; one moment strutting away in all the pride of conscious power and affluence ; the next pining away in the most abject poverty and degradation ; proving to us that the descent from the summit of vain-glory to the abyss of human misery is both rapid and easy. One false step not unfrequently will decide our fate, and plunge us headlong into the gulph of destruction. The beginning of sin, as the beginning of strife, is, as when one letteth out water ; you cannot arrest its progress or prescribe bounds for its inundation. “ Abstain, therefore, from all appearance of evil ;” nor despise the day of small things, either in the commencement of a career of vice or of virtue.

Gaze, then, upon this portrait of human wretchedness, nor unfix your eyes

from the contemplation, until you have imbibed a horror of that sin which has thus defiled and defaced the fairest features of our nature ; until you have been enabled to adopt the resolution that you will “go your way and sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto you.” The prodigal in the text had arrived at this conclusion, and such was the sentiment which was already kindled in his bosom. Hitherto we have regarded him only with emotions of pain and disgust ; as a warning beacon to every youthful traveller to avoid his contagious example. We shall now call upon you to behold the bright side of the picture, where we shall discern much that is worthy of admiration and imitation.

The first act in the career of penitence which we notice is that of *deliberation*. We read that “the prodigal came to himself.” He began to think—to reflect—calmly to survey his past career ; he regained the possession of his faculties, and the light of reason and religion began to

dawn upon his soul ; the candle of the Lord illumined his darkness. He seemed to be like one awaking from a midnight slumber, or like a man having burst the confines of the grave, rising again to newness of life. Indeed the sacred writers employ this imagery to describe the resurrection from a state of sin. St. Paul, in writing to the converted Ephesians, reminds them that they were dead in sin, but that they had now been quickened by grace, and raised up by Jesus Christ. And, in another place, addressing the sinner, he says, “Awake, thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light.” This was the state of the prodigal. The delusion had vanished from his eyes ; it had passed away as a dream of the night. He was no longer besotted in the arms of sleep, but awake and become alive to his sin, his degradation and ruin. In addressing his perverse, rebellious, apostatizing people, “Thus saith the Lord God, Con-

sider your ways." The young spendthrift began, for the first time, to halt in his progress. He looked back upon the course which he had hitherto been pursuing; he looked forward into that gulph of destruction, yawning to receive him if he continued to advance. He could discern nothing before him but desolation and misery. He was appalled at the sight, and doubtless in the bitterness of his anguish he cried out, "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" But he stood alone; none to intercede for him; none to help him; without a friend to sympathize with him, if he could do no more; nay, without a companion, save the swine which he was compelled, by the pressing demands of hunger, to attend; and with whom, if permitted, he would have sat down to meat. He was indeed of all men the most miserable. There was he, lately caressed by hundreds, the envy of all who knew him, now left to drag out

alone a miserable existence, despised by some, but deserted by all, save by *one*, who, as the sequel will show, had not cast him off—the God whom he had so grievously offended; his Father, whose laws he had violated, whose loving-kindness he had so resolutely perverted into an occasion of licentiousness. But although externally he was destitute of every thing that could confer happiness, this valley of humiliation was only the path which was to conduct him through its intricate windings to the abode of peace and blessedness.

It is good for us all to be afflicted—to be made to bow our heads like a bulrush to the storm of adversity. Afflictions, when sanctified by divine grace, are often rendered mighty to arrest the progress of some daring sinner—to convince him of the error of his ways—and to point out to him the path that leads to heaven. It is the season of prosperity which is fatal to our health and happiness, and dries up the well-springs of life: as

an old writer observes, "it is the sunshine that brings the serpent from his hole." More children perish from being pampered in the soft lap of luxury, than from being rocked in the hard rustic cradle of poverty. The sword of temptation, sharpened by lust, hath committed more havoc among mankind at home, than ever the steel sword of the warrior hath pierced in the field of battle abroad. When we are minished, or brought low, by reason of any sickness, any affliction of body or soul, any sense of spiritual unworthiness, helplessness, or desertion, we seem compelled to seek for consolation and deliverance elsewhere than in ourselves or in the world. Having found the insufficiency of any thing earthly to afford the restorative balm, or to mitigate the thrilling horror of our bosom; having learnt by painful experience that "vain is the help of man;" driven out of our strongholds, as we have deemed them, we fly for succour and for refuge to the

arm of Omnipotence, and are not disappointed. This was the case with our prodigal. He felt all the horrors of his destitution and degradation, but he felt still more acutely the pangs of an awakened, a guilty conscience, which no effort could remove, no human remedies could alleviate. “A wounded spirit who can bear,” or subdue? Like the afflicted and distracted gaoler at Philippi, he began earnestly to make the inquiry, “What must I do to be saved?” To remain in his present position was death; to return to the place from whence he had just gone out, was damnation. His mind, no doubt, was the scene of much conflicting opinion as to the most adviseable and legitimate course to be pursued. He took a review of his past life; he compared his present state of indigence to his once flourishing state of affluence. His thoughts, by a natural process, reverted to his once dearly beloved father, and all the advantages and blessings which, as a dutiful son,

he enjoyed under his parental roof. He made an invidious comparison between the inferior members of his parents' domestic establishment, and himself as one of the children. "How many hired servants of my father have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger?" The folly of his former conduct, in having so rashly abandoned his father's house, now flashed upon his mind with all the vividness and force of lightning. His lips would only give utterance to the language of self-condemnation and self-abhorrence. He found to his cost that, painful as he imagined his situation to be, whilst under the control of his father's eye, and under subjection to his father's commands, he was now in circumstances far more pitiable, and encountering a servitude far more degrading. The conviction was forced upon him that the wages of sin was disgrace and death. We can well imagine in what bitter terms he reproached himself for his reprobate and

resolute determination to quit the land of his nativity—to take the reins of government into his own hands, when he was totally ignorant of the first principles of self-control. What now had become of all his boasted strength, and his superior powers of discernment? Emaciated in body and attenuated in soul, he stood confessed before God and man, a fool in all his folly. Doubtless that which imparted an additional sting to the upbraidings of his conscience, was the reminiscence of the affectionate treatment he had received whilst a sojourner at home. The fond look of pleasure or of pain, beaming from his father's eye; the parental exhortation; the extorted expostulation; the tender remonstrance; the mild, yet dignified, and justly-merited tone of rebuke; nay, the positive commands of his father, were now all endeared to him; and recurred to his mind with an impulse which was irresistible, tearing open his bleeding wounds. Had

he been driven from the scene of his youthful days by the severity and unnatural conduct of a cruel father, forcing him from his doors, there might have been in this reflection some mitigation of his sorrow ; but it was just the reverse. He was a voluntary exile ; an exile against his father's entreaties, who had displayed towards him all those tokens of affection which are engendered in the heart of a fond parent towards a beloved child. He was, therefore, without even a shadow of an excuse. This it was, doubtless, that sharpened the edge of the prodigal's anguish, and plunged the arrow of conviction into the inmost recesses of his soul ; inflicting a pang which he could neither mitigate nor endure.

View, then, the subject through a spiritual medium. Conviction fastens upon the sinner's soul. His sins are arrayed in judgment before him. Their magnitude and number appal him. He is confounded at the sight. He knows not

whither to fly. He seriously laments his past folly, and mourns in strong accents of unavailing regret, the situation into which he is plunged, and from which at present he scarcely sees a hope of extrication. He halts in his career. He looks back upon the path along which he has traversed, and forward to that which is in prospect. In accents of strong lamentation and bitter reproach, he calls to his remembrance the hour in which he left his Father's house, the temple of his God, and notes it down as the most wretched of his existence. Perhaps, in the bitterness of his soul, he adopts the sentiment of Job, and says, "Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night in which it was said, there is a man-child conceived." He now hungers and thirsts after that righteousness which he lately despised; and sees the inability of the present things of time to satisfy his famished soul. He envies the privileges of those whom he has left behind, who are

still permitted to “enter into the courts of the Lord’s house,” none making them afraid or ashamed. He sees that for the humblest servant in God’s house there is not only bread enough and to spare ; but “wine and milk, without money and without price ;” nay, a “feast of fat things,” capable of enriching the soul unto eternal life ; so that even the meanest of God’s servants is luxuriating in all the riches of the gospel, while he is pining away with hunger, deluded by specious promises in the slavery of satan. Gladly would he now be permitted to occupy any station under Him “whose service is perfect freedom :” most joyfully would he become “a door-keeper in the house of God ;” he would willingly be made a “hewer of wood, and drawer of water” in the service of the tabernacle, rather than dwell as he has done in the tents of ungodliness. He would rather serve in heaven than reign in hell ; or, in the words of Luther, “he would rather fall

with Christ than reign with Cæsar.” O ! he envies “ the sparrow which hath found her an house, and the swallow which hath built her a nest around the altar of God,” and esteems “ one day spent in His courts, as better than a thousand elsewhere,” though decked out in all the finery which the world can display. His heart may be said to pant after, and his soul to thirst after the living God. Fired with a holy and righteous self-indignation ; perishing with a famine of the word of God ; naked, destitute, and defenceless, without the sword of God ; a fugitive and a vagabond, he determines on retracing his steps, and imploring to be admitted again into the household and family of God.

Our limits will not permit us to-night to see him carrying his determination into execution ; but we leave him in a much more favourable situation than we found him on the last occasion. He is come to himself ; or, we may with more propriety say, that the Spirit of God is come to

him, to convince him of his sin ; he feels its bondage, and earnestly does he desire to be delivered from its captivity. Though still in a far country, he is about to return, and has set his face towards Zion. With full intention of purpose, he determines to walk in newness of life, and to inquire for the “good old ways,” which he once traversed so peacefully and so pleasantly, had he only been conscious of his happiness ; but alas ! he was at that time panting to explore some untried path, and to satiate his thirst for novelty at some forbidden or unexplored fountain. A few steps more and he would have been irrecoverably lost.

See, my young friends of either sex, whither a sense of your own misery and destitute situation should conduct you—back again to your Father’s house. Consider every pang you suffer, every deprivation you endure, every misery that bathes your cheeks with tears, as so many gracious calls of God to arrest you in

your perilous career. It is God sending his special messengers after you to invite you to return ; to beckon you back again to your home ; yea it is God himself speaking to you and saying, “ Return, ye backsliding children.” In the hour of tribulation fly on the wings of devotion *to* God ; not on the wings of impiety away *from* him. Never attempt to take the remedy for your wrongs and wretchedness into your own hands ; they cannot be in worse. See whither the atheist, the infidel, the scorner, the ungodly of every description, betake themselves in the hour of tribulation. They know of no cordials or palliatives but such as the world provides. They know of no other quarter from whence help can be procured than their fellow man. They ransack the whole world in search of some restorative balm ; but the world says, It is not in me. “ They run to and fro, seeking rest but finding none.” They endeavour to drown the voice of

conscience in the cup of intoxication. In the sober interval, however, it must be heard ; but it is heard only to goad them on to madness and despair. Taught by their infidel creed and devilish master, to disbelieve in a future state of responsibility, they seek to terminate their present sufferings by present death ; with suicidal impiety, they unwittingly launch themselves into the presence of that God, whose existence they have either pretended to doubt, or whose power they have presumed to defy. Could we draw aside the veil of time, and look into eternity, we should see many a wretched victim of self destruction agonizing in the unquenchable flame ; because with daring impiety he resisted the authority of his Maker, and sought to redress, by expedients of his own invention, his imaginary grievances ; because in the spirit of infidelity, (claiming for himself the right to do what he wills with his own,) he disposed of himself as seemeth him good,

by the halter, the sword, or the bullet ; and bequeathed his vile inglorious body an immediate legacy to the worms and corruption, and his soul to the fearful executioners of divine indignation. But mark the different conduct of the Christian penitent. He looks *upwards* for help : his eyes are directed towards his Father's house. In the full assurance of hope, and expectation of being recognized by him, he implores his aid, and casts himself upon his mercy ; “ the name of the Lord is his strong tower, he runs into it and is safe.”

Lastly. Contemplate the long suffering and forbearance of God as manifested through Jesus Christ towards his rebellious people, with such undeviating constancy. Did this stripling go alone, unattended into a far country ? Went not the eye of God with him ? Though he had rejected God, and discarded him from his thoughts, *self* being the only object of adoration, yet would not God abandon

him *for ever*; though he did for a season, in order to make him feel the consequences of his wayward conduct, to drive him into obedience; but he would not *finally* cast him off. He had a design of mercy towards him which must be accomplished. In his own appointed time he brought him to himself; he spake to him by the still small whisper of his Spirit; he called him to himself by the voice of affliction. Had not God thus searched him out, and dragged him from his unhallowed haunts, without doubt he would have perished everlastingly. But such is the way of God. He sends his dearly and only begotten Son on a special embassy of mercy, "to seek and to save that which was lost." He draws us to himself by the cords of love; or else he follows us with the rod, and lashes us back again into the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. He is still engaged in this gracious work of recalling the wanderer, and reclaiming the prodigal. He still sustains his charac-

ter as the “long-suffering God, plenteous in goodness and truth.” Do you ask for a proof of this? Cast your eyes around this congregation ; we see here no feeble testimony of the forbearance of God ; for had he remunerated us according to the measure of our iniquity, weighed in the balance of justice, we should not have been congregated beneath this roof, but the doom that is pronounced upon the soul that sinneth must have been ours. O ! then let this “goodness of God lead you to repentance.” Why will you perish in the wilderness, with the door of your Father’s house standing open to receive you? Arise then, and act as the prodigal did, as we shall endeavour to show in our next lecture, if spared to deliver it.

LECTURE V.

LUKE xv. 18, 19, 20.

I will arise and go to my Father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son, make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose and came to his Father.

SUCH was the wise determination, and such the instantaneous execution of the prodigal's purpose. It was the suggestion of heaven. *That* he did, he did quickly. Delay in his case would not only have been dangerous, but fatal; misery and destruction were at the door. This was no time for hesitation; he must either be presently extricated from his critical situation or immediately perish.

He did not remain long in the posture of deliberation where we left him on the last occasion. The recollection of his father's kindness, the fond endearments of the parental roof, contrasted with his present abject poverty and degradation, recurred to his mind with a force it was impossible to resist. The school of adversity disciplines the soul for a glorious eternity; like the law, it brings us to Christ.

The mourning son knew well the character of his father; that he was not an austere or implacable tyrant, spurning the petitioner from his presence; that the avenues of his heart were not closed against every approach of misery and destitution. He had probably seen the tear of compassion in his father's eye, excited on many occasions by the recital of a *stranger's* woes; would he forbid it then to flow when his *son* solicited his sympathy? or turn a deaf ear to the cries of his *own* boy, supplicating only a morsel

of bread at his hands? It could not be! His nature must indeed be strangely altered, if he could turn from his doors the child to whom he himself had given existence; and this too a supplicating, perishing, penitent child; his youngest child: a child on his knees suing for admittance. Oh! he felt it was impossible; his father would then have forfeited all title to the very name of *father*. He would have been a monster in creation.

We read indeed of the “ostrich, who layeth her eggs in the dust; who is hardened against her young ones, as though they were not hers, because God hath deprived her of wisdom;” but she is designated as cruel, and become proverbial for the desertion of her offspring. “Yea,” says the prophet Jeremiah, “even the sea-monsters draw out the breast, they give suck to their young ones.” Can it be, then, that man, the last and best of God’s works, created after his own similitude, should betray so little of that character-

istic emblem of Deity, love, as to force not only from his embrace, but from the very threshold of his house, the son whom he has begotten?

At all events, the prodigal was determined to put his father's kindly feelings to the test. Though he was now a great way off; far removed not only from the spot, but from the land of his nativity; he resolved instantly to execute his purpose, and retrace his steps. No preparation for the journey was necessary, for, alas! what could he make? Of goods and chattels he had little; of gold and silver he had less; the tattered garment which barely concealed his nakedness was probably all he possessed; for the sequel of the story shows that he was so destitute as to be barefooted.

In this humiliating state as a beggar, did he retrace the track he had so lately travelled, possibly with all the pomp and splendour—with the costly equipage and gilded retinue of a prince—an object of

admiration by all, but now of scorn and contempt. But if as to outward circumstances he had undergone so complete an alteration as scarcely to be recognized, the change which had taken place in his soul, in the inner man, was not less striking. He was, indeed, to use the familiar language of the day, quite another man.

We pass over all the intermediate process of his journey, from the scene of his profligacy to the still endeared spot of his birth and innocence. Scripture is silent on the subject ; let conjecture therefore be silent. He had no difficulty in discovering the way back again, for the Spirit of God was his guide. We may imagine him gaining the first glimpse of his father's house, from some distant hill. How did his heart throb with alternate emotions of joy and fear, doubt and desire ? At every turn of the road he met with some object to remind him that he was near *home* ; a name which until lately had vi-

brated in his ear with unspeakable delight; for after all, to the weary traveller there is nothing like home. Let us never be satisfied until we reach home: here we have no resting place: but are only strangers and pilgrims. Perhaps he recognized some of his former companions and partakers of his joy; though he was to them an utter stranger, an alien. A thousand circumstances and appearances reminded him of scenes and days of happiness not to be recalled. Doubtless, he mourned in the bitterness of his soul, and like David, going up to the Mount of Olivet, "he wept as he went." He faltered in his steps. He hesitated. He was afraid to advance. He meditated a retreat; but he thought on his father's kindness and acknowledged reputation for mercy, and was encouraged to proceed; till at last the much-dreaded, though much-desired meeting is obtained. Self-abased, self-condemned, he stands in the presence of his much insulted, but

still much loving parent, a beggar in all his beggary, a sinner in all his sins.

You, my young friends, who have ever been convicted of a fault, and have stood like a criminal before your father's judgment seat to implore his forgiveness, can better conceive, than I describe, the anguish of this downcast youth. It may in some measure be collected from the sentiments which he uttered. What did he say? Just what he ought, and no more. His words, though few, were very expressive, and very affecting; such as would have melted a heart composed of sterner materials, than that to which they were addressed. "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son." Mark the expression! He acknowledges that he is unworthy to be called his *son*, but still he is unwilling to drop the appellation of *father*. As if he would say, I cannot forget that you are my *father*; although justice demands that you should

forget that I am your *son*. If you disown *me*, as you justly might, I cannot disown *you*. Bad, desperately wicked, as my conduct hath been, still it cannot sever, though it may relax, the ties of relationship. Though my crimes have made us *two*, nature hath made us *one*. Though separated from thee by a thousand leagues, and a thousand wrongs, still “Thou art my father, the guide of my youth.” Indulge me therefore by allowing me to bestow upon you the appropriate endearing appellation of *father*. I claim your compassion, and seek for mercy as your unhappy son. If you deem me undeserving this title, bestow upon me the appellation of a servant ; call me by any other name, however degrading ; but do not reject me ; do not disown me. I throw myself at your feet for mercy. I stand not here to vindicate myself. I have not a syllable to urge in palliation of my deeds. My whole defence is summed up in these words, “I have sinned.” And

against whom? Not merely against thee, but against my Father who is in heaven, against thee, my God.

This is the leading ground of his complaint. "I have sinned," says he, "against heaven and before thee." He mentions the deed perpetrated against God *first*. Here is a double source of affliction; that the crimes he had committed were violations both of the laws of God and man; affecting therefore both his present and future welfare. This was the blow he could not endure. It was painful enough to have violated the feelings of his earthly father; but oh! it was insupportable anguish to have offended the Majesty of heaven; the God of his creation and preservation; the great universal Father.

This consideration deeply affected him, and inflicted a pang for which hitherto no remedy had been discovered. He could only acknowledge the debt he was unable to pay. He could only freely and inge-

nuously confess himself to be a sinner. This was his only consolation; the confession of his guilt. He threw himself upon his father's mercy for pardon and forgiveness. More he would have done, had aught been available; but what reparation could he make for the aggravated offences he had so daringly perpetrated? Or how could he efface the crimson stains wherewith their commission had polluted his soul? In the first place, he literally was destitute of every thing; he had nothing which he could call his *own*, save his *sins*.

Secondly, had he been in possession of all the wealth of both the Indies, he never could have paid the redemption price of one single transgression. He did all which in his present situation he could do; he came to his father, and in language most eloquent, but most simple, as his own advocate at his father's bar, pleaded guilty to every part of the indictment—"I have sinned." Deal with me

as seemeth thee good, O my father ; but cast me not out of thy house ; if thou art unwilling to own and retain me as thy son, “ make me as one of thy hired servants.”

We have then in this picture before us, a most beautiful portrait of the genuine repentance of a Christian prodigal ; an accurate delineation of scriptural conversion, which it is impossible to contemplate an unmoved spectator.

First of all here is the recognition of God by the most appropriate of all terms, as the *Father* of the universe. The character of the wicked is, that they “ live without God in the world.” What is true of the whole mass, may be asserted of each individual ; their object is to banish the name and presence of God from their thoughts. All their actions, all their employments, all their amusements, are framed with reference to the exclusion of God ; the very recollection of whom, if perchance he is forced upon their atten-

tion, causes a thrill of horror through their frame, and almost arrests the progress of their blood through its veins; they “desire not the knowledge of God, or of his ways.” They know nothing of him in his endearing capacity of a father, but estimate him only as the avenger of iniquity; the infallible judge of their unhallowed conduct.

Not that they are altogether fatherless; for what our Lord said to the unbelieving Jews, may be also asserted of them, “Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye do.” But when the Spirit of God has begun to soften the obduracy of their heart, and to convince them of its depravity, God is represented to them in a new aspect; no longer clothed in terror, enveloped in fire, hurling around him the weapons of destruction; but as a loving, merciful father, “plenteous in goodness and in truth.” It is true, that they cannot but behold him as a deeply offended Father;

but viewing him through that medium of communication, his own Son—the bleeding Saviour, he is exhibited as surrounded by all the endearing emblems of reconciliation; they see the bow encircling the throne, but pointed upwards, and no arrow attached to it: the weapons of warfare having been laid aside, they have “peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

The first accents then, which the penitent, the newly born child of God is taught to lisp, are those of *Abba, Father*. He addresses his parent with all the affection of filial appropriation, as *his* Father “who is in heaven.” Though he has been a great way off, having banished himself as far as possible from his father’s presence and house, yet he is determined that nothing shall any longer effect the separation. He has an ardent desire to return to the place from whence he went out. He arises therefore from his besotted sleep, and casts aside every thing

that might impede his progress. At first he hesitates, and seems to doubt whether he should advance ; whether it is possible he can be received ; whether he has not outsinced even parental forgiveness.

The first steps of a Christian penitent, like those of a little child, are faltering and retrograding ; but he is secretly led on by the invisible agency of the Holy Spirit, and at length he runs to his father, prostrates himself at his feet, and hiding his face in the dust, addresses him in the affecting language of the text, “ Father, I have sinned in thy sight.”

This is the next point to be noticed in the penitential career—not only the acknowledgment of God, but the *acknowledgment* of the *sinner's guilt*. What a change is here ! What an alteration have time and circumstances, or rather I should say, the grace of God, produced in his heart.

Self-justification, naturally engendered in the heart of every man, displays its

power on every occasion which can call forth its energy. When detected in a fault or convicted of a crime, what is the first impulse of the mind? To attempt in some measure to vindicate the transgression, to find an excuse for its commission, to palliate its enormity ; or else to remove its guilt to the shoulders of some other person ; to urge the magnitude of the temptation as the reason for yielding to its pressing solicitation. This is invariably the natural impulse of the human heart, unsanctified by the Spirit of God ; to establish its own righteousness is the primary object of its attainment.

But oh ! how different is the sentiment after the Spirit of God has moved upon the face of the soul, and levelled the mountains of human pride ! We are taught then to estimate ourselves by a very different standard. We no longer, comparing ourselves with ourselves, or with our fellow creatures, are wise ; weighing ourselves in the gospel balance,

we are found miserably wanting. All then, is self-depreciation, self-abasement.

This was the case with our penitent prodigal. He does not fill his mouth with arguments, such as might have a tendency to establish his innocence ; or, if he failed in that, to prove his comparative righteousness, that he was not *worse* than others, nay, *better* than many ; he lays his soul as it were naked before God, and exposes all its deformity. Like David, “ he acknowledges his transgression, and his sin is ever before him ;” he can never forget it ; he bears the remembrance of it to his dying pillow. Nay, so far from extenuating his faults, he is disposed to augment their number and magnitude, and is ready to brand himself with the appellation of the apostle of old, the “ chief of sinners.” He sees *something* at least of the deformity of sin ; the *full* display of all its distorted features would overpower him : he de-

fects it even in his most hallowed services, and abhors himself in dust and ashes.

But that which overpowers him almost to distraction, is the reflection that his transgressions have been committed, not simply against his fellow man—against the father who begat him, or the monarch under whose salutary laws he has been protected and nurtured ; but against the supreme ruler of the universe, his Heavenly Father—the King of kings, and Lord of lords. Oh ! he weeps rivers of tears to think that it is his God whom he has offended ; not so much because he dreads his vengeance, as that he displays his own base ingratitude, in having so ill requited such a series of tender mercies and loving kindness. Oh ! it is painful to feel in the common intercourse of life, that the being whose character we have grievously vilified, whose name we have traduced, whose goodness we have abused, is our greatest benefactor ; whose time

and energies have been devoted to the promotion of our happiness.

But oh ! what language can describe the agony, when the scene of this baseness is transferred from earth to heaven ; and our Father and our God becomes the object of our reproach and calumny, against whom the weapons of our hostility are directed with unwearied diligence ! This consideration so harrowed up the feelings of the patriarch David, that it might be truly said of him, “ the iron entered into his soul,” and marked by its bloody track the wounds which it had created. Though the foul deeds which he had committed under the dominion of a raging lust were against his fellow man, a violation of the first principles of humanity ; yet in the confession of his wickedness, and in the acknowledgment of his guilt, what does he say to his God ? “ Against *Thee only* have I sinned, and done this evil in *Thy* sight.” Every thing else seemed to be of minor

consideration. The outrages committed upon society, the bed of his neighbour which he had so impiously defiled, and his blood, which with still greater impiety he had caused to flow, affected him deeply ; but not *so* deeply as the thought that it was his God who was insulted ; and that in his own person, he had committed a daring act of violence even against Deity itself.

This was the primary feature in the prodigal's confession when he went to his father, and throwing himself at his feet, poured forth his lamentation ; " Father," said he, " I have sinned, first, against heaven, and then before thee."

My young friends, ever remember that those who sin against their earthly father, are undutiful also to their heavenly Father. Offences against their parents are offences against God. They are, so to speak, God's representatives here on earth ; the appointed guardians and protectors of their children. God himself has invested

them with this authority. If children, then, rebel against their earthly head, what is it but an act of defiance against their omnipotent Head? Show me a child without natural affection, disobedient, a violator of the fifth commandment, however else he may be designated—whether he be learned, or lovely—the heir of a princely estate—certain it is, that, in his present condition, he has no title to be “a child of God, nor an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.” Let parents and children consider well their reciprocal duties. Parents, “provoke not your children to anger.” “Children, obey your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing unto the Lord.”

But we pass on to the *last* particular to be noticed—the *humiliation* of the Christian prodigal. Like the young man in the parable, he confesses that he is no more worthy to be called a *son*. He has forfeited all title to that endearing appellation. He seeks, it is true, ad-

mission into his father's house, but no longer as a son ; he would now rejoice in the name and treatment of a servant. He would most gladly now return to his occupation, disgusting as it was, of feeding swine, if he only knew that they belonged to his father. This is invariably the sentiment of every penitent returning sinner. As nothing occasions him so much pain as a consciousness of alienation from his heavenly Father's family and church, so he desires nothing more ardently than to be again admitted to his Father's household ; and when admission has been obtained, he will be anxious to be employed in his Father's service ; to hold any situation, however humble.

How altered his tone ! He now lays no claim to his forfeited inheritance : he asks not now, in language selfish and insolent, for *his* portion of goods ; he talks no longer of his *rights*, but only of his *wrongs* ; the wrongs which he has heaped

upon his father. He deems himself unworthy to sit down to table with the household and family of God, or to partake of the same bread, or drink of the same cup, with the “sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty;” he only asks for the treatment of a stranger—an outcast—yea, of a *dog*. He solicits a few crumbs only that fall from his master’s table; just that he might be permitted to taste of the bread and water of life, that he may not die. He is constrained by painful experience to confess that the hardest service in the church of God is perfect freedom; especially when compared with that detestable slavery into which he was seduced under the promise of liberty, when enlisting under the banners of the arch-deceiver. Pay me my wages, said he, to this arbitrary tyrant, whom he had served so faithfully for a long succession of years. “Take that thine is; go thy way,” said the monster. And what was the reward of his hire? Instead of the

fulfilment of the specious promises which had allured him from his home and from his duty, he finds, to his utter dismay and chagrin, that the wages of sin are only present misery and eternal death; that, although he had gained a little of this world's pleasure, yet that he had lost his own soul, which the whole world could not redeem. In an agony of grief he runs to his father, and prays for admission on any terms into his father's house: "Make me as one of thy hired servants."

This is the proper temper and disposition with which to seek to gain admittance into the realms of glory—-to acknowledge ourselves not only as unworthy to receive the *least* of all God's *mercies*, but as most worthy to receive the *greatest* of his *punishments*. "He," says Solomon, "that covereth his sins shall not prosper, but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy." There must be no attempt at concealment by any mantle of self-righteousness, or by any

texture composed of those flimsy materials which the world would provide. Neither, in the forensic language of the day, must we sue for a mitigation of damages, on the grounds of partial obedience ; of comparative vice, or of comparative virtue. We must plead guilty to every indictment which an accusing conscience will not fail to urge against us with unerring fidelity ; we must seek for mercy solely on the ground of mercy. “ God be merciful to me a sinner,” procured the justification of a penitent publican ; while “ God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are,” procured the condemnation of a proud pharisee.

We have now endeavoured to exhibit to you a lovely picture of christian penitence, as exemplified in the same person who a short time before appalled us by the deformity of his features. How then has the transformation been effected ? It can be accounted for only on one principle — “ by the grace of God he is what

he is." The Spirit of God has moved upon the face of his icy, hardened heart, and the tear of repentance has flowed; the rock has gushed out with an inundation of woe at the divine mandate. Though outwardly he retains all the lineaments of his former humanity, yet inwardly he is the subject of a complete renovation, and comes forth in all the freshness of a new creation in Christ Jesus.

If, in the first instance, we have been led to mourn over the prodigal's wanderings, and to elevate him as a warning beacon; we must now call upon you to rejoice at his return, and bid you behold the man as an object worthy of all imitation.

This picture of personified penitence is both beautiful and instructive. It is not the mere extorted ejaculation of regret for past delinquency, while death is staring us in the face, and we are every moment expecting its approach, which con-

stitutes godly sorrow. It is not the mere determination to abandon sin, when we are so debilitated as to have lost the power of committing it, at least in deed, if not in thought. It is not the cold heartless surrender to God of our souls and bodies, when the one has been so attenuated by sin, and the other so enfeebled by disease, as to be a dead, not a living sacrifice. It is not the mere adjustment of our vices and virtues at the close of a long life, and striking the balance of the latter in our favour, so as rather to make God a debtor to us than we to him ; or, if the balance be against us, placing the Redeemer's merits in the scale to eke out the difference. This may be the quantum and the quality of sorrow, which the world will prescribe as the atonement for guilt ; but it is just that sorrow that "worketh death." It lulls the soul into a fatal slumber ; and when it is enjoying its delusive dreams, whispers in grateful accents, "Peace, peace ;" but what peace

can there be when its iniquities are so many, and those unforgiven? Not because they are past forgiveness, but because it has never been sought for at the fountain of mercy—because the perishing culprit never stood before God in the posture of penitence and of prayer.

If you, my dear young friends, have never gone, under a deep conviction of your destitution and ruin, to throw yourselves for mercy into the arms of your Redeemer; fidelity constrains me to inform you, that you have never appeared before God in a penitential garb. You “are dead whilst you live.” Hitherto you have only been entitled to adopt the sentiment of that prelate of the Romish church, of persecuting notoriety; I mean Bishop Bonner, who is reported with his dying breath to have said, “*Erravi cum Petro, sed non cum Petro flevi* ;” which being interpreted signifies, “I have sinned with Peter, but I have not wept with Peter.” Arise, then, and go to your

Father. Let no time, or distance, or space, or sense of unworthiness, restrain your advances. You cannot be in a worse situation, or at a greater distance than the prodigal, who to all human appearance, had banished himself never to return. Yet he was not only re-admitted to his former privileges, but he was reinstated amidst shouts of acclamation, and crowned with additional glory and honour.

Will you, then, not be accepted? The Father is most willing to receive you, because he is a Father—the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ; and, through him, of all the children which are born unto him. A sinner on his knees is a sight which even the Majesty of heaven delights to behold. He cannot resist such importunities. Besides, “in your Father’s house are many mansions,” in which a place is prepared for your occupation. There God will vouchsafe all his blessings; here you can neither receive or enjoy

them ; you are not yet at home ; here you are a stranger. We bid you enter the paternal palace, and dwell there for ever and ever.

The gracious reception which you will meet with, we must reserve for a future consideration.

And now, how shall we dismiss you ? In the words of dying Joshua : “ If it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve.” And the people answered, “ God forbid that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods ; the Lord our God will we serve, and His voice will we obey.” May this be the secret settled determination of all here present ; may God, of his infinite mercy, dispose you to do that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

LECTURE VI.

Luke xv. 20, 21.

But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him ; and the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son.

THE interesting subject of our narrative, on the last occasion, we left speeding his way back to his home with accelerated steps. He felt that his home and his happiness, nay, his very existence, were inseparably united. Every thing depended on restoration, if not to his former privi-

leges, at least to some position in his former house.

But the question was, what reception he was likely to meet with from his deeply insulted parent; whether he should ever be again admitted within the walls of his paternal abode. The result proves that he had formed a correct estimate of his father's affectionate and merciful disposition. He felt a secret conviction, amounting to an assurance, that he should not be expelled, a houseless fugitive, from the endeared spot of his nativity; that if he could once gain access to the door of his father's hospitable roof, he had only to "knock and it would be opened unto him."

We proceed, then, now to the consideration of the son's *reception*, and the *forbearance and lovingkindness* exhibited by the *father*.

A wayward child, who has at the same moment abandoned his home and reputation, is not with the same degree of fa-

cility abandoned by his parents. They may *try* to forget him, seeing that the remembrance of him is painful ; but they cannot succeed. In spite of themselves, in moments of retirement, in a dream or vision of the night, the image of their boy will often be presented to their imagination ; and a thousand circumstances will occur to remind them of the loss they have sustained—that they too once had a son ; but whether or not he is now in existence, they are unconscious : it may be “that some evil beast has devoured him”—that they walk childless upon the earth.

It is probable that the father of the prodigal was indulging in a similar train of reflection, and that almost insensibly his thoughts recurred to his child. Doubtless he was scarcely ever out of his remembrance. Although we are unable to assign the cause, yet few will be unwilling to admit the fact, that we are often led to think and talk of some absent friend or

acquaintance, whose steps, after a long interval of months or years, are nigh at the door; so that he is presented to the eye of our imagination, some time previous to his introduction to our actual sight; in order, as it would seem, that by some providential anticipation we may be prepared for his approach.

Whether such was the case with the father in the parable, the history does not inform us. Certain, however, it was, that when he was “yet a great way off,” the father spied his son. Who can tell what a day or an hour may bring forth? Little did the father think, when he arose in the morning, that he should lie down at night having folded in his embrace his long lost son, restored to his family and friends; if not in the plenitude of wealth and of power, still in the plenitude of tears, of penitence, and of grace.

So, however, it was ordained. The father beheld what he no doubt believed to be a stranger, a beggar crossing his fields,

and advancing with rapid strides towards his house ; but as he drew nigh, judge of his surprise—judge of the emotions of his bosom, partly of pain at his degradation, but still greater of joy at his restoration, when he recognized the features of one who was near and dear unto him as his own soul. No disguise, however artfully contrived, can conceal from the eye of a parent the lineaments of the child whom he has begotten. There is some private mark known only to a parent ; or the general aspect and deportment are such as at once bespeak *his* child. The father traces, in the approaching stranger, his own portrait, the faithful representation of himself, or of the mother who has borne him ; and at once proclaims and owns him as *his son*. He cannot be deceived. The voice of nature speaks to him, and must be heard. Even the old blind patriarch Isaac discerned rightly his son Jacob, when he said, “ The voice is Jacob’s voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau.”

Although no doubt the features of the fugitive had undergone all that change, the necessary result of poverty, and the vicissitudes of life, and climate, to which he had been exposed; still, in the midst of all his beggary and rags, even though he was at a considerable distance, the father recognized his spendthrift, prodigal son. There was a something about him, which at once proclaimed him to be *his* child. He could not be mistaken. But, alas! how changed was the ruddy complexion of the youth, who had left his roof in full possession not only of his property, but of his strength and health. None but a father could have recognized the *same* individual, though he could hardly be said to be the *same*; so altered was he in the external character of his body, and not less in the internal deportment of his soul. He left his father's mansion in all the pride and independence of inexperienced youth. He returned to it with all the humiliation of one whose

hopes had been blasted—whose ambition had been extinguished—whose mighty projects had been annihilated. Still, though cast down, he was not destroyed; he stood a penitent in all his sorrow.

But what was the conduct of the father, when he first beheld his son, with accelerated steps, hastening towards his home? Did he run towards his house with full determination of purpose, to barricado the doors against the entrance of his child, and to forbid his approach? To arm the domestics in hostility against their young master? Did he determine, at all events, to expel the wanderer, and force him to become a fugitive and a vagabond upon the face of the earth? No! he ran, it is true, but it was *forwards* and not *backwards*—to meet his child, not to avoid him. He ran as fast as his aged feet would allow him, to throw his arms around the neck of his still much loved, though much sinning boy. His bowels of compassion yearned towards him;

every other sensation was completely absorbed in the feeling, that he once more folded in his embrace the object he so ardently desired, but scarcely hoped again to behold. We read, "that he ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him."

So eager is he to clasp to his heart the restored pledge of his affection, that he waits not until he hears his son's defence; what he had to urge in mitigation of his conduct. He withholds not the salutation until he is first assailed with the cry of mercy; but at once rushes forwards with all the impetuosity of a doting parent, and welcomes his child back again to his heart and to his home, with a kiss of delight, which none but parents know; by that act sealing the pledge of affection, and at the same moment the assurance of pardon. He had no need to hear from his son's lips the accents of humiliation and mourning. There was something in the whole aspect of the boy, and in the tears which no doubt flowed down his

furrowed cheeks in an unrestrained stream, which bespoke at once the penitent. His poverty and wretchedness were alone sufficient to secure a passport to a parent's bosom. It was enough that his child was in want, and that he as his father was enabled to succour him.

It might have been reasonably supposed that the wild extravagant conduct of the young man would at least have met with a rebuke from his father ; that before he admitted him into his house, he would have reasoned with him on the impropriety of his conduct, and the daring act of defiance both towards God and man, of which he had been guilty. We read of no such sentiment of reproach and condemnation. There is not even the tender expostulation. Nothing that savoured of harshness or of reproof, though it was justly merited ; yea castigation the most severe. The pitiable condition of the son—his posture of humiliation—his supplicating countenance, had completely

disarmed the wrathful indignation of the father ; all the son's misconduct was entirely obliterated from his father's recollection, and wiped away by the kiss of affection ; he seemed only to remember one thing—that his son was alive, and stood before him a petitioner for his mercy. Even if he could have resisted the eloquence of his eyes, it was almost impossible to have withstood the touching language which proceeded from his lips, which we have by anticipation fully considered—"Father," said he, "I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son." In all the bitterness of a wounded conscience, he stands before his parent a self-condemned criminal : "he confesses his iniquity, and is sorry for his sin."

Here then let us rest awhile, and gaze with rapture upon this interesting scene so frequently acted upon the theatre of domestic life. The sun in its course

could scarcely animate with its presence a more endearing sight—a sight which makes even the vault of heaven to resound with the approving song of angels. Here is a father folding in his embrace, raising from the dust, a hopeless and hapless child, who in the madness of his career, had embarked on a perilous enterprise—the pursuit of pleasure; but had now returned wrecked in property, in health, in reputation, destitute of every thing but a father's blessing; the outcast of society, rejected by the world; but finding refuge in that very house, which he lately shunned as if it were infected with a pestilence.

Oh! it is a cheering spectacle, to see the long-lost prodigal once more entwined in the arms of a doting parent, who seemed now to have no earthly wish ungratified. He could fully participate in the feelings of the patriarch of old, when he said, “It is enough, Joseph my son is yet alive; I will go and see him before I die.”

But language and imagination would fail us, were we to attempt to delineate, however imperfectly, the throbbings of delight which swelled the bosom, both of the parent and of the child, as the one breathed forth the assurance of his sorrow ; the other, the assurance of his forgiveness. Their history stands recorded as an encouragement to every transgressing child, to retrace the steps of its iniquitous career ; while it speaks in language not less forcible to every parent, behold thy son liveth, receive him back again to thy house, lest a worse thing come unto him.

Hitherto we have regarded this history simply as the record of a deed wrought out upon earth by two of its inhabitants, which it is of a truth lovely to behold. But there lies concealed a hidden beauty, which can only be discerned through the spiritual telescope. We see before us a faithful, though faint exhibition of divine love, as displayed by our heavenly Father

towards his rebellious but repentant children. We here read for ourselves the records of God's redeeming mercy manifested towards a sinner through Jesus Christ; as far eclipsing all human transactions, as the heavens surpass in altitude the earth; or as the nature of God exceeds in perfection the nature of man. We may form some idea of human love; but imagination fails when we attempt to delineate the love of God—like the peace of God, “it passeth all understanding.”

This is the *second point* to which we would most particularly solicit your attention. God is here represented to our view as our “reconciled God in Christ Jesus;” arrayed in all his glorious attributes of mercy; “long-suffering, plentiful in goodness and truth,” exercising his royal prerogative of pardoning whom he wills, “forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin.” Infidelity only can refuse to see that the reception of a sinner unto God through Jesus Christ, is the doctrine

which is here sought to be established. Indeed it is more or less the prominent feature of almost every parable recorded in Scripture.

God the Father is here represented as seeing his son, the christian prodigal, a great way off, and having compassion upon him. When the world first apostatized in Adam, forfeited the divine favour and protection, and exposed itself to all the penalties of that irrevocable curse, which converted a paradise into a wilderness ; it was, nevertheless, not entirely banished from the presence and mind of God. He saw it, but it was afar off ; with an altered obscured vision. He spake to it, but it was as from a distance, though still in accents of love. But although it had been alienated from him by the transgression of Adam ; it was to be brought near to him by the righteousness, intercession, and blood, of Christ. It was not doomed to eternal banishment from the presence and mercy of God ; and of

this he gave the earliest possible intimation, when he promised that “the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent’s head,” and that by this means the sinning apostate world should be brought into a state of reconciliation with himself; should be brought, so to speak, nearer to himself.

This promise of a future Saviour, who was to remove the cause of alienation between the Father and his rebellious children, was renewed from time to time to patriarchs and prophets. These revelations might be said to be so many stepping-stones, by which God advanced in his march of mercy towards mankind; each progressive step was an assurance that the time would come, when “mercy and truth should meet each other, when righteousness and peace should kiss each other.” This was literally accomplished in the person of Jesus Christ, coming in our nature in the flesh. Then God actually approached the world, came as

near to it as he could do ; he visited it, he dwelt upon it, and might be said to fall on its neck, and imprint upon it the kiss of forgiveness and acceptance. Then it was that “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them.”

The apostle Paul, in his Epistle to the Ephesians, has a beautiful illustration of this doctrine ; “But now,” says he, “in Christ Jesus, ye who sometimes were *afar* off are made *nigh* by the blood of Christ.” So that Christ is the great channel of communication between earth and heaven ; the great medium of access to the Father ; and although the world by its iniquities was removed as far as possible from God ; had banished itself from the superintending eye of its Creator, to the utmost extent of divine observation ; still “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, to the end that it might not perish, but that all who believe in him might have everlasting life.” It is

to this gracious scene of reconciliation that the prophet Isaiah so forcibly alludes when he addresses the heathen world : “ Hearken unto me, ye stout hearted, that are *far* from righteousness ; I will bring *near* my righteousness, it shall not be far off, and my salvation it shall not tarry.” It did not tarry ; it was brought nigh, even to the doors, when Christ “ arose with healing in his wings, to be the light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of the people Israel.”

What is true of all mankind collectively, is true of each one individually. We are all by nature “ alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in us ;” living at a distance from him ; and if ever we gaze upon God we see him only afar off ; left to ourselves in this forlorn condition, we should eternally perish ; but the moment we manifest a desire to “ draw nigh to God, he will draw nigh to us ;” nay, he will impart to us the will, the desire, the ability, to turn

unto him ; for, says Christ, “no man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him.” He draws us by the secret cords of his love ; by the silken chain of his affection. All the convictions of sin, the strivings of the spirit, the stings of conscience, the tears of repentance, are the leading-strings by which we are insensibly allured towards God. It is God going out to meet us when we are on the high-road to destruction, and gently whispering to us, “This is the way, walk therein.”

But so complete is the delusion, that we imagine we are making advances towards God ; when in fact it is God who makes advances towards us. Left to follow the guidance of our own lust, or even unsanctified reason, we should rather retrograde than advance ; we should become more attached to, and hardened in, our iniquities ; in that state wherein the apostle says, it would be “impossible to renew us to repentance.” Allured by

the fascinating scenery which bewitches the eye of the travellers along the broad way, we should pursue our course until we are entombed in the bottomless gulf of destruction. But God sees us afar off; he beheld us from eternity; he sets his love, his everlasting love upon us. He calls us to himself by his word, by his Spirit, by his ordinances, by our consciences; so that we are enabled to rise up at the first intonations of his voice, and say with the child Samuel, “Here am I, for thou didst call me.”

He not only stands ready to receive us, and most willing to pardon us, to welcome us to all the privileges which we have forfeited and despised; but he himself goes out to meet us; he steps out of his place, in order that he may make the first advances towards us; he gently leads us by the hand; he guides us by his eye, until he has placed us within the pale of security. “He never leaves us, nor ever forsakes us.” With

such eagerness do the bowels of God's mercy yearn towards mankind in their lost estate, that he longs for their return, as an anxious parent does for that of his runaway child. "The Lord will not cast off his people whom he has fore-known." The prophet Isaiah asks this question: "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should not have compassion on the son of her womb? Yea they may forget, yet will not I forget thee." It is not only within the range of possibility, but it is an event which sometimes actually occurs, that even the *sucking* child has its supply of nutriment denied by its unnatural mother, and is abandoned to all the horrors of famine and of death; nay, such monsters have been known, who have actually imbrued their own hands in the blood of their innocents, and themselves have destroyed that life which they had imparted, and were bound to preserve. But we challenge the scorner and infidel to produce

one instance in which God our heavenly Father ever abandoned, or cast off one of his children ; having “ loved them with an everlasting love,” he loves them unto the end ; and none, no man, or angel, or devil, shall be able to pluck them out of His hand.

Then, again, does the Father in the parable declare his readiness to forgive, nay, actually seal the pardon with a kiss, even before the son had expressed his sentiments of sorrow and repentance ? See here a faint transcript of divine love. Our heavenly Father gives to us *more* than we ask, and *before* we ask. Before we call he answers. He prevents us with the blessings of goodness. He is a discernor of the secrets and intents of the heart ; “ he understands our thoughts long before they are uttered” or conceived by us. The Spirit, as it were, “ makes intercession for us, with groanings which cannot be uttered.”

Misery is the object of mercy : and

although God likes to hear the confession of wretchedness from our own lips ; yet it is not because he needs the information, but because he would know that the sinner himself is conscious of his own degradation and desolation. It may be, that our heart is so overpowered with the accumulated load of its iniquity, that the tongue refuses, and is unable to utter the anguish which rankles within the bosom ; but the eye of a Saviour God beholds it all ; “ he is about our path and about our bed, and spieth out all our ways ;” he knows the secrets of our hearts, and sees and relieves the untold, because unutterable anguish of our souls : “ so that being justified by faith, we have peace with God,” peace within ourselves, “ through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

But there is one more particular feature in the parable to be noticed, the *complete silence of the father* with respect to his son’s delinquency. So far from its being made the subject of bitter invective, it is

not even made the subject of distant allusion ; in order that no reference to the past might overshadow the joy of the present hour. Indeed, where would have been the use of recurring to events beyond the reach of control, which could not be amended, only deplored, as indeed they were by the unfeigned penitence of the unhappy culprit? The past therefore was buried in oblivion, at least as far as the father was concerned ; forgetfulness on the part of the son would have been an impossibility : it could only have been effected by a decay of faculties, or the departure of life.

Is the forbearance then, and tenderness of God our heavenly Father, less strikingly displayed towards *his* children? Hear his own gracious declaration. “ If the wicked will turn from all his sins that he hath committed, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall surely live, he shall not die ; all his transgressions that he hath committed, they shall

not be mentioned unto him.” What a gracious assurance ! How reviving to the trembling penitent, who has dreaded the exposure of his guilt. In another place, speaking by the mouth of his prophet Isaiah, he says, “ I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will *not remember* thy sins.” The hand-writing which registered their atrocious deeds shall be fully and finally effaced ; while the hand-writing which has recorded their works of faith, and deeds of mercy, shall *never* be effaced ; they will be eternally registered in heaven. The sinner shall not be taunted with the fact of his being a sinner, because he is accepted as righteous ; and the foul spots of his iniquity have been completely erased by the purifying, sanctifying blood of an incarnate Saviour ; not that the impressions of sin will entirely be eradicated from his bosom, and never recur to his imagination ; they will ever live in his remembrance, though

he has the best reason for believing that he has been ransomed from their guilt.

We find David bewailing his iniquity in the fifty-first Psalm, though the prophet had said, "The Lord hath put away thy sin." Though the believer has the witness in himself, that he is absolved from the consequence of his atrocious deeds, and that they will not rise up in judgment to condemn him; still the remembrance of them must be grievous, and at times the burden intolerable. But he has this consolation, that the page of his history once stained with the crimson dye of his iniquity, now presents a spotless surface, on which no marks are legible; nought is recorded against him; his sins, from having been "red as scarlet, are made white as snow," because he hath been washed in the blood of the Lamb. God even here is unwilling to mention the sins of his people: for as it has been remarked, he notices the patience of Job,

but says nothing about his *impatience*; whereas the way of man is to overlook the virtues of others, and speak only of their vices.

Here we are constrained to pause. We must reserve the consideration of our penitent's future blessedness, and glorious privileges, for our final lecture.

See here, my youthful auditors, and while you gaze, admire the love of God the Father in Christ Jesus, condescending to human infirmity; bending himself to your tender years; adapting himself to your capacity, or rather *incapacity*. He knows the dangers to which you are exposed, and the difficulties you will have to encounter, in attempting to extricate yourselves from the labyrinth of the world; to regain the narrow path which leads to heaven: that if left to your own puny efforts, a return would be impracticable. He therefore goes out to meet you, placing his "everlasting arms underneath you," lest at any time you should "dash

your foot against a stone;" or else he shields you, lest a stone should "fall upon you, and grind you to powder." What, though you are so far alienated from God, as to be unable to discern him, that with the telescopic apparatus of faith, you cannot even catch a glimpse of him! Be not discouraged. You are not out of the reach of Omniscience; you have not deviated, whither the eye of your Father cannot follow you. A parent has a watchful eye; it beams upon you still with love, and would bring you back again to your home. Neither is God so far removed from you, as to be unable to hear the accents of your supplicating voice. Call upon him, and he will graciously answer, for he is "much more ready to hear, than you are to pray:" only, "commit thy way unto the Lord, trust also in him, and he shall bring it to pass." Difficult as your salvation may be in your estimation, it is not impossible; nothing is too hard for Omnipotence, only "arise, and go to your Father."

In the *last place*. Let those parents, if any such there should be out of the astonishing multitude assembled before me, who are now mourning over an undutiful, profligate child, who bids fair to “bring down their grey hairs with sorrow to the grave,” not give way to despair. The case of the young man before us, shows that it is *possible* he may yet think of returning to God, and that it is *certain* he will be accepted if he does. Your house of mourning on his account, may yet be converted on the same account into the house of rejoicing.

You who have hitherto counted your son as dead, may yet view him alive. You who have hitherto given him up as lost, may yet fold him in your embrace, restored to his senses, to his home, to yourselves, and to his God. Who knows what designs of mercy the Lord may meditate towards him? His arm is not shortened that it *cannot* save, nor his goodness extinguished that he *will not*

save. Instead of parents abandoning themselves to useless, inactive, silent anguish, which preys upon their vitals, let them raise their voices to God in supplication and intercession for their children. If they have gone astray from your house, and are out of the reach of your personal superintendence, they are not out of the reach of your prayers, or of God's grace. See that you yourselves are not chargeable with their delinquency, either because they have never been benefited by your fervent intercessions; or else have been positively injured by bad precept, and worse example. I conjure parents, in love and affection, to ponder well these things, lest "their children's blood be required at their hands."

On the other hand, think how transporting the delight, when standing in the midst of a glorified world, to be able to point to your offspring, as so many monuments of parental solicitude; that not a child has been lost through your inad-

vertence ; but that you can appear before your Judge and say, “Behold me, and the children whom thou hast given me.” Think of this ; think of the delight of meeting a whole family in heaven, and glorious will be the result.

LECTURE VII.

LUKE xv. 21—24.

And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him ; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it ; and let us eat and be merry, for this my son was dead, and is alive again ; he was lost, and is found.

AT the close of our last lecture, we beheld the son folded in the embrace of his forgiving father ; he pours forth his whole soul in those touching accents which we have before noticed, “ Father, I have

sinned against heaven, and before thee." Every look, every word, every action declared the penitent. It was scarcely possible for scepticism itself to call in question his sincerity ; at all events, his father was not among the number of the incredulous. He felt convinced that his son did not add to his other crimes that of hypocrisy. Dissimulation, indeed, would have been of no avail, even if it could have been assumed for a time ; for detection, exposure, and expulsion, must have resulted from the discovery. The tears which bedewed his eyes, were not forced from their secret recesses by the momentary effort exerted on the occasion ; they were the spontaneous, involuntary overflowings of a heart, no longer able to restrain within its boundaries the flood of penitential mourning. His father's bowels of compassion yearned upon him, and he lost not a moment in restoring him, not merely to his home, but to all the forfeited privileges of sonship. The

prodigal asked only the treatment and office of a servant, but, to show his complete and entire forgiveness, the father invested him with all the honors which parental affection could suggest. This is the *last point* we have to consider in the prodigal's history. He was treated, not as a culprit, but as a prince. "Bring forth," said the father to his servants, "the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet : and bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it, and let us eat and be merry."

We may well imagine, what necessity there was for a complete change of apparel, when we consider the degradation to which the suppliant had been reduced, and the disgusting employment into which he had been forced by the imperative demands of hunger. Thus situated, he was totally unfit, either to appear in the presence of his father, or to sit down to meat with those who were ranged around his father's table : he would have been an

offence to all about him, his person being barely concealed by a few tattered rags, and even those filthy. But he was not long to remain this object of pity, nay of disgust. He was first to undergo a complete purification and cleansing, to be washed from all his filth and pollution; and then not merely to be clothed afresh, which would have been a great consolation; but to come forth adorned with one of the most splendid robes, reserved for state occasions. And as a still further token of honor, he was to be designated with a ring on his finger: the emblem of rank and distinction, perhaps bearing the arms or crest of the family, to show that he was re-admitted to his former station, and recognized as one of the domestic circle. And as no doubt he came barefooted, shoes suitable to his dignity were placed upon his feet.

What a change was made in the condition of this once miserable fugitive, but now thrice happy ransomed captive! One

moment we behold him grovelling in the dust, treated as the offscouring of the earth; the next we see him promoted to honor in the eyes of all around him; crowned with such glory and loving-kindness as a father only could bestow, for who but a father would have pitied him in this low estate of prodigality?

But this was not the only testimonial of his parental delight, which he displayed in folding to his bosom the returning wanderer. His joy must not be of an exclusive nature, restricted merely to himself and his child, but diffused over the whole household, perhaps extending to his relations and friends, and the whole vicinity: as, doubtless, they had wept with the venerable father, when they saw him weeping over his bereavement; so now they must be invited to rejoice with him, when he was rejoicing at the discovery he had made. The fatted calf must be killed, which had been fed in the stalls for some extraordinary festival.

That period had arrived. The calf must die, for a more appropriate occasion of festivity could scarcely be imagined; to the father indeed it was, beyond all comparison, the happiest day of his life, and it was wholly unexpected: "This my son," says he, "was dead, and is alive again, was lost, and is found;" that is, was virtually dead to me, become as useless and unprofitable to me, as if he were no longer a sojourner upon earth; but is now restored to me alive, as one having burst the bands of death. He was lost in the wide world of sin. He had lost his senses, lost his property, lost his reputation, lost his all; but is now found—found, so to speak, of himself, for he has recovered his reason; he has regained his all; he has found his way back again to his father's house; yea more, he has found his father, his still loving, though deeply injured father, and with him all that he can possibly desire, and O! how infinitely more than he can possibly deserve!

Here then we have arrived at the close of the narrative ; but we pass on, in order to make the spiritual application of the subject, in which its beauty and force principally consist. The whole is intended in some measure to delineate, (for who can declare *all* its fulness?) the divine attribute of mercy, as displayed by God our heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, towards his rebellious, but returning household ; honouring them with all the tokens of adopting love, investing them with all the immunities of heirs of immortality. When he beholds any of his children advancing towards him in a penitential attitude, hiding their faces in the dust, girt about the loins with sackcloth, and sprinkled on the head with ashes ; he gently lifts them out of the mire, addressing them in this endearing language, “ Bring forth the best robe, and put it upon him.” This implies a previous state of destitution.

We have the authority of divine tes-

timony and Christian experience, for asserting, that the character of man by nature is, that he is “miserable, poor, and naked.” What Job says of himself in a temporal, may also be asserted with an equal degree of propriety, in a spiritual point of view: “Naked came I out of my mother’s womb.” It is true, that like his guilty forefather Adam, his descendant tries to conceal his nudity and deformity by some stratagem of his own invention; by the fig-leaves of his own fancied righteousness, by some vestment of his own workmanship, the operation of his own hands; but so flimsy are the materials of the composition, that the nakedness is perceptible through the transparent texture, and the distorted features still stand out to public gaze in all their native hideousness. The best substitute which man can provide for the decoration of his person, and the covering of his transgressions, however specious in appearance, or skilful the execution, can never

rival the beauty, or possess the efficacy, of that dress selected from the king's wardrobe, with which He invests his family. "Nay," says the prophet, "even our righteousness," the best of our apparel, is only in the sight of God "as filthy rags." So far, therefore, from possessing in itself any cleansing property, itself needs to be purified from its natural defilement and corruption.

We must, then, be utterly divested of our own garments, and be washed from the filth and pollution of guilt, in that "fountain opened for sin and uncleanness," ere we shall be fit to appear in the presence of Him, "in whose sight the heavens are not clean." But this, God our heavenly Father himself effects in his own children ; for those whom "he justifies, he also sanctifies." He himself, by the secret operations of his Spirit, carries on the purifying process in our souls, "purging our consciences from dead works, to serve himself, the living

God." All that he requires of us is to hear from our own lips the acknowledgment and confession of our uncleanness and destitution. He will then "put on us glorious apparel," and make us fit to stand in His presence. He will bring forth for our use, and invest us with, the "best robe."

This expression of the "best robe," is generally understood by commentators to mean, the righteousness of Christ, which being imputed to all his people, covereth all their sins, and presents them pure and immaculate before the mercy-seat. This is what the apostle calls the "righteousness of God which is by faith upon all them that believe." So that by faith apprehending this righteousness, the sinner is admitted into the household of God ; not on account of his own, but for the merits of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. But as we contend not for any peculiar names or phraseology, we would also state, that the best robe may

signify not only that righteousness which is *imputed* to us, but which is also *imparted* to us, or produced *in* us, whereby we are enabled to become in any measure obedient to the law, and conformable to the image of Christ ; or, in other words, it may denote *personal holiness*, the implantation of that power by which we are enabled at all to “walk as sons of God, holy, and without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.” Thus, adorned with the wedding garment, the beauty of holiness, we shall be acceptable guests at “the marriage supper of the Lamb.” This is the “fine linen,” the “white raiment,” the “righteousness of the saints,” which St. John describes as the appropriate garb of the heavenly worshippers, and which can alone conceal the shame of their nakedness. This is the best robe, the royal robe, made “white in the blood of the Lamb ;” which, reflecting the glory of the Lord, shall cause the “righteous to shine forth as the sun in

the kingdom of their Father.” “Such honour have all his saints.”

But there is another mark of distinction which shall be bestowed upon those who are sanctified. A “ring shall be put upon their hand.” The ring was formerly, and is at this moment in eastern countries, a token of exaltation ; and designates the person thus adorned, to be an individual of rank, holding a distinguished situation in society. Thus we read, that when king Ahasuerus was desirous of conferring some mark of royal approbation upon Mordecai, “he took off his ring, and gave it to him.” This then is generally understood to be emblematical of the Spirit of God, whereby “we are sealed unto the day of redemption.” This is the signet on our right hand, bearing the divine image and superscription, which at once demonstrates “whose we are, and whom we serve.” Or else it may appropriately denote that bond of spiritual union which

exists betwixt Christ and his church, whereby they are rivetted together by one interminable link of unalienable love; just as at the marriage ceremony we place the ring upon the finger of the bride, as emblematical of uninterrupted unity and harmony. At all events, it is an honorable badge of distinction, and characterizes the wearer as a man “approved of God, thoroughly furnished unto good works;” it is one of those ornaments of sanctifying grace, which ennobles and adorns the christianized subject.

The portrait, however, is not yet completed—something else must be added. “Shoes must be placed on the feet.” Allusion is here made to this necessary part of our dress by the apostle, who says, that Christians should have “their feet shod with the preparation of the gospel of peace.” This is essentially requisite to enable them to “go on their way rejoicing,” in the midst of a world of tumult, of toil, and of trouble; to lift

them out of the mire ; without this, they would not be enabled to overcome any obstacle which might be placed in their path, hindering them in “running the race that is set before them.” But such is the tender mercy of God, he “keepeth the feet of his servants,” so that lying as their journey does, amidst rocks and precipices, briers and thorns, he preserves them that they are not dashed in pieces against the one, or lacerated in pieces by the other : he enables them to pass uninjured through the vale of tears, to his own house, the mansion of blessedness. He himself prepares, and presents them with the preservative ointment, the preparation of the gospel of peace, which gives stability to their steps, and supplies the healing balm for every wound ; so that the Lord thus “ordering a good man’s ways, he makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.” Behold the goodness of God towards his apostate children : “he will not break the bruised

reed, nor quench the smoking flax.” Who does not ardently desire to cast off the grave-clothes of corruption, yea even his own fancied ornaments, and to be clothed upon with the robe and the ring?

But the ample superabounding provision which God has made for the sustenance of his perishing people remains yet to be told. It is not that scanty supply which we dole out to a famishing beggar who solicits a morsel at our hands, to rescue him from famine. For those who come hungry and thirsty to God, their souls fainting within them, the fatted calf must be killed—they must have a “feast of fat things,” “of wines upon the lees.” God would impart to them “all things richly to enjoy.” Who does not see that in this allusion we have a type of all that plenitude of gospel mercies so freely and fully offered to a dying world? What but the “flesh of Christ, which is meat indeed;” what but “the blood of Christ, which is drink indeed,” is capable

of nourishing and sustaining the soul unto eternal life? It would be mere mockery to attempt to satiate the famishing soul of a weary pilgrim with food of any other quality, obtained from any other quarter ; it would be as if a father were to extend a stone to a perishing child who had entreated bread ; or to give him a serpent to sting him to death, when he had asked for a fish to preserve him alive. God the Father then sets before his supplicating mendicant the gospel of his dear Son, and bids him, largely and liberally, partake of those mercies and privileges it so copiously provides, until he is satisfied ; until he feels himself strengthened and invigorated, ennobled and enriched ; until he is enabled to walk in newness of life, in newness of hope, in all the glorious freedom and liberty of one who is “ an heir of God, and joint heir of Christ.” The gracious God points out to him his only begotten Son, as “ the bread of life,” “ of which they who eat shall live for ever ;”

so that whereas sin has introduced leanness and a famine into the soul, till it is nigh unto death ; the gospel imparts a restoring and vivifying power, by which it gathers strength unto eternity, and comes forth in all the freshness and vigour of a new creation. Thus shall it be done unto the man whose “ meat and drink it is to do the will of God ;” from having participated here below in the fatted calf, that is, of the rich banquet of gospel mercies, he shall be qualified to sit down in the appropriate garb at the marriage supper of the Lamb.

But the transaction here recorded between God the Father and the penitent sinner, like that of the prodigal and his father, is an affair much too important to be celebrated only in private by those who are the principal actors ; the whole family and household must record the triumph. Angels and Archangels must tune their harps to songs of praise, and unite in ascribing “ Glory to God in the

highest, and on earth peace, good-will towards men." Accordingly we read, "that there is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth." Though the event here, on earth, may be allowed to pass unnoticed, or, if noticed, only to be treated with contempt by ungodly men; yet will the heaven of heavens re-echo the deed, and the returning ransomed fugitive will be welcomed into his Father's house, amidst all the melody of celestial anthems. Wherefore? because, says God, "this my son was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found." This is the case of all mankind by nature. With respect to God and their immortal souls, they are in this state of deathlike insensibility; nay, St. Paul reminds the converted Ephesians of the time when they were actually dead; "dead in trespasses and sins;" having, it may be, a name to live, but in reality being *dead*.

Oh! thou child of prodigality, of folly, and of the devil, behold your misery and

pity yourself. Though you may possess all the energies of animal existence, and be nerved for animal enjoyment, your “sinews as iron, and your brows as brass,” still we are bound to tell you, that there is no life in you; you are spiritually dead; dead to the calls and strivings of the Holy Spirit;—dead to the pure unalloyed delights of religion;—dead to the anticipations of future blessedness;—dead to the family and household of God;—eternally dead, as being dead unto God himself! Lost—lost to every thing that is valuable and precious, having lost your senses; lost your riches; lost your health;—lost your life;—lost your soul, and lost your God.

O thou fugitive and vagabond upon the face of the earth, whither wilt thou seek for rest for the sole of thy foot? Every step in your wicked career, in proportion as it is a retrograde movement from the house of your Father, just in the same proportion is it a progressive ad-

vancement towards the satanic abode. Pause! O pause then in your course, for you may rush forwards beyond the line which, once passed, can never be regained. The Spirit may be grieved, yea, it may be quenched, it will not “always strive with man;” you may be deserted by God; the light of God’s countenance may be withdrawn; you may be “given over to a reprobate mind;” it may be “impossible to renew you to repentance.” But now the arms of your Father are ready for your embrace; the house of your Father is open to receive you; the friends and family of your Father are ardently desiring to welcome your approach; the festive table of your Father is spread for your reception. Come then to this banquet of delight; behold the ring and the robe are pressed upon your acceptance. We wish indeed to see you dead, but it is “dead unto sin, and alive unto God;” dead to the frivolities and follies of time, but alive unto the realities and joys of eter-

nity. We wish to see you lost ; lost by your former companions and acquaintance ; lost to the world, but found by God ; found in heaven through Him who came “ to seek and to save that which was lost.”

Scripture history does not enable us to follow this reclaimed wanderer into any of the scenes of his after life ; doubtless the remainder of his days was distinguished by an ardent devotion to the commands and authority of his earthly parent—it became his meat and drink to do his will ; and, with respect to his heavenly Father, against whom he had so grievously sinned, and by whom he was so graciously pardoned, he desired that, whether in life or in death, he might eternally glorify His Holy Name.

Into the remaining portion of the parable our limits do not permit us to enter, neither does it form a component part of our present arrangement ; suffice it to say, that the conduct of the prodigal is

intended to illustrate the character of the penitent publican, admitted to a full participation of divine grace; while the conduct of the eldest son is a portraiture of the self-righteous pharisee, murmuring at the admission of his less deserving brother to equal, if not greater, privileges than himself; who, in his own estimation, was alone entitled to all the bounty of his father, as the just tribute of remuneration for his meritorious conduct. But the whole reasoning of this monopolist of divine favour is triumphantly refuted by our Lord, in the same chapter, wherein he says, “that joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons who need no repentance.”

We have now accompanied the prodigal throughout his chequered career. We have gone out with him into the far distant country, whither, in his folly and impiety, he thought to escape the scrutinizing eye even of his God. But we

have beheld him brought back again, in safety, to the house of his father, by that very God to whom he disowned allegiance ; but who, nevertheless, would not suffer his unalterable love to be alienated. God bears much and long with his rebellious people ; it is not until he is absolutely compelled, by their obstinacy and hardness of heart, that he consigns them over to the hopeless doom of the reprobate.

From the contemplation of the scene before us, what emotions ought to be kindled in our bosoms ? An intensity of love, and an eternity of praise. See here the mighty power and mighty goodness of God displayed in arresting the career of vice and prodigality, hurrying on their victim with a force which nothing but the arm of Omnipotence could resist, into the gulf of unfathomable misery. Who, on gazing on the departure of this young man from his parental roof, for distant climes, ever expected to see him restored to

the bosom of his family, except, perhaps, conveyed thither an emaciated corpse, shrouded in a coffin, to be deposited in the tomb of his ancestors? Who must not have anticipated his destruction? But God had a design of mercy towards him; he would display his long-suffering and forbearance; he would magnify the exceeding riches of his grace, in rescuing the “brand from the burning,” so that where sin had abounded, grace might superabound to his own honour, and praise, and glory.

Who has powers of imagination to conceive, much less who has eloquence to declare, the exceeding amplitude of that salvation, so wonderfully wrought out for us by that Redeemer, whose death we are shortly more especially to commemorate? But, although we are wholly unable to do justice to the subject, it is impossible, *altogether*, to remain silent; for, if our tongues were to cleave to the roof of our mouths, and refuse to re-echo

the Redeemer's praises, the very stones would rebuke us, and become vocal. The very sea itself would make a noise, as if to bellow out the adoring song; the very "floods would clap their hands" in token of joy; the whole creation would join in one universal chorus, and fill the canopy of heaven with the song of redemption, bidding us all "behold the Lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world."

But while the subject is one of overwhelming interest, and affords the greatest possible encouragement to every *penitent returning* prodigal, it holds out not the least prospect of hope to the *impenitent, unbelieving, still hardened offender*; he has but little reason for self-congratulation at the prospect before him. The wrath of God is as clearly revealed against him, and will be as certainly executed, as that the sun is placed in the firmament. Great as is the mercy of God, in his present state it cannot be extended towards him; his doom is fixed, "the soul that

sinneth it must die," is the sentence pronounced against him. Who can avert it? None but that Redeemer whom he has rejected, whose mercies he has despised, whose invitations he has spurned, whose calls to repentance he has obstinately refused to hear.

"Who is the most miserable man upon earth," asks an eminent divine, "and whither shall we go to seek him? not to the tavern, not to the theatre, not even to a brothel, but to the church. That man who has sat sabbath after sabbath under the awakening and affecting calls of the gospel, and has hardened his heart against these calls, he is the man of all others the most desperate." It avails him not that he is ranked among the honourable men of the earth; that he holds an exalted station in society; that he is "clothed in purple and fine linen, and fares sumptuously every day;" he is an abomination in the sight of his Maker; he walks upon the earth under the just judgment of a

righteous God. O! deceive not yourselves, lay not the soothing unction to your souls, that you *may* repent at any given moment, or that a few words of sorrow, forced from your lips at the prospect of death, will move the compassion of the Lord to overlook all that is past. We must take the Scriptures as we find them, nor attempt to mould them to our own views, or to adapt them to our own inclinations. There we find a woe of unutterable anguish denounced against every worker of iniquity. The apostle, after having enumerated a long catalogue of ungodliness, concludes the whole by saying, that “they who do such things, shall not inherit the kingdom of God.”

Hear ye this then, ye careless daughters, and thoughtless sons! Ye of every age, and of every rank, who are still “tied and bound by the chain of your iniquities;” who are still at your ease, living in sin, that grace may abound; See, O see, ere it be too late, the ine-

vitale termination of your suicidal obstinacy ; see whither you are hastening with tremendous precipitation. One step more, and a retreat may be impracticable ! You may be given up to uncleanness ; to the lust of your own hearts, to the reprobation of your own minds ; because that, “ knowing God, you glorify him not as God, neither are thankful ;” your “ iniquities may make a separation between you and your God.” I conjure you then, I implore you, by all that you hold most dear, to pause in your career ; rush not forwards into the abyss of ruin ; return, return, like the prodigal, to the bosom of your God. Return, thou backslider, thou wanderer, and thou waverer. Cry aloud for mercy, while the day of mercy lasts ; to-morrow may be the day of vengeance. Know in what your peace and security consist ; only “ arise, and go to your Father.”

We are here compelled to take our leave of the interesting subject of our narrative ; but we cannot do so without

an ascription of praise and honor to Him, who has erected, in the person of the ransomed prodigal, a splendid monument of redeeming grace, to be read of all men throughout all ages, recording the resurrection of one who was dead, and is alive again, through Jesus Christ. “Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to preserve you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever.” Amen

THE END.

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